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Allegiances

[image]

SummerClan

Leader: Featherstar: Long-furred silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy: Liontooth: Pale ginger tom

Medicine Cat: Sagefeather: White she-cat with gray paws

Warriors:

Stonesong: Gray, long-furred tom

Birchclaw: Light gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Emberpaw

Dovewillow: Light gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Amberpaw

Dustcloud: Stocky gray tom with green eyes, former kittypet

Cindershade: Dark gray long-furred she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Badgerpaw

Echofrost: Black tom with lighter paws

Apprentice, Redpaw

Mistdapple: Silver-and-white she-cat

Apprentice, Nightpaw

Cloverwing: White-and-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Owlfeather: Brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Leopardpaw

Oakwind: Dark brown tabby tom with black paws and tail

Branchwhisker: Long-furred brown tom

Apprentice, Goldenpaw

Applebreeze: Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Turtlespots: Brown-and-red tom with a white chest and paws

Mapleblaze: Tortoiseshell she-cat

Scorchtail: Long-furred ginger tom

Dawnblaze: Ginger tabby she-cat

Apprentices:

Nightpaw: Black she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Badgerpaw: Black-and-white tom

Redpaw: Russet tabby tom

Amberpaw: Ginger she-cat with white paws and amber eyes

Emberpaw: Red-and-ginger she-cat

Leopardpaw: Spotted golden tabby tom with green eyes

Goldenpaw: Yellow tabby she-cat

Queens:

Brambleflower: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes, mother to Owlfeather's kits:

Mudkit: Dark brown tabby tom-kit with a lighter chest and paws

Windkit: Dusty brown she-kit

Hickoryfall: Golden-brown she-cat with yellow eyes, mother to Liontooth's kits:

Thornkit: Golden-brown tabby tom-kit with yellow eyes

Finchkit: Brown tabby she-kit

Sedgefang: Gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes, mother to Dustcloud's kit:

Nettlekit: Gray-and-white tom-kit with green eyes

Elders:

Wolfpelt: Dark, long-furred gray tom with green eyes

Brightpetal: Gray-and-white tabby she-cat

Flowerstream: Long-furred white she-cat with blue eyes

SpringClan

Leader: Meadowstar: Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Waspthorn: Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat: Larkfeather: Brown tom with white paws

Warriors:

Stagstep: Light brown tabby tom with a cream-colored chest and paws

Brackentail: Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Riverpaw

Sootwhisker: Gray tom with blue eyes

Puddlefur: Gray-and-white tom with spots that look like puddles

Pigeontail: Light gray she-cat

Darkwing: Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Woodpaw

Creamstripe: Cream-colored tabby she-cat

Thrushnose: Brown-and-cream mottled tom

Apprentice, Leafpaw

Swiftwhisper: Cream-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Roseclaw: Reddish tabby she-cat with cream-colored paws

Russetshade: Red tom with black patches

Apprentice, Stempaw

Rainsong: Bluish-silver she-cat with blue eyes

Silverlight: Gray tabby she-cat

Birdbreeze: Light gray she-cat with yellow eyes and white paws

Flowerthorn: White she-cat with green eyes

Flashfoot: White-and-black tom

Apprentices:

Leafpaw: Light brown tom with yellow eyes

Stempaw: Brown tabby tom with white paws

Woodpaw: Brown, long-furred tom with yellow eyes

Dewpaw: Silver tom with blue eyes

Riverpaw: Bluish-silver she-cat

Queens:

Grasswhisker: Light gray tufty she-cat with green eyes, mother to Darkwing's kits:

Whitekit: White she-kit with blue eyes

Snowkit: Long-furred white tom-kit

Duskflower: Gray, long-furred she-kit with blue eyes, mother to Waspthorn's kits:

Blizzardkit: Silver tabby tom-kit with blue eyes

Bristlekit: Gray, long-furred she-kit

Breezekit: Silver tabby tom-kit

Elders:

Jayleaf: Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Marigoldtail: Golden tabby she-cat

AutumnClan

Leader: Echostar: White tabby tom with blue eyes

Deputy: Drizzletail: Silver tabby tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Heatherfall: Cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Mosspaw

Warriors:

Leafwind: Light brown tabby tom

Grassdapple: Brown-and-white mottled she-cat with amber eyes

Milkfoot: Light gray tom with white paws

Sandclaw: Pale cream-colored she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Foxpaw

Shrewfur: Light brown tom with yellow eyes

Barkthorn: Dark brown tom

Cedarfall: Long-furred dark brown tom with lighter paws

Apprentice, Birchpaw

Ottertuft: Dark brown tufty she-cat

Snakeleaf: Mottled gray-and-white tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Alderpaw

Timberstorm: Gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Goosepaw

Patchstripe: Tortoiseshell tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Redpaw

Poppycloud: Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Sunfire: Golden tabby tom

Wildlight: Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Berryfang: Reddish tom with white paws and green eyes

Boulderstorm: Black tom with yellow eyes

Bristlepelt: Black long-furred tom

Apprentices:

Goosepaw: Gray speckled tabby tom with milky blue eyes

Birchpaw: Light gray tabby she-cat

Mosspaw: Gray tabby tom, medicine cat apprentice

Foxpaw: Reddish tom with black paws and ears, yellow eyes

Alderpaw: Red tabby tom with yellow eyes

Redpaw: Russet-and-white she-cat

Queens:

Dustnose: Light gray, long-furred she-cat with blue eyes, mother to Milkfoot's kits:

Mintkit: Light gray tom-kit with white patches

Lilykit: White she-kit

Icekit: White, long-furred she-kit with cold blue eyes

Brightkit: Long-furred white she-kit

Thistlepelt: Golden tabby she-cat with tufty, long fur, mother to Cedarfall's kits:

Mousekit: Small, dusty-brown tom-kit with amber eyes

Bramblekit: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Elders:

Acornleaf: Ginger tom

Gingerstripe: Ginger tabby she-cat

Whitecloud: White she-cat with blue eyes

WinterClan

Leader: Kestrelstar: Red-and-white tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: Tigerstripe: Ginger tabby tom

Medicine Cat: Sparrowtuft: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Wolfclaw: Gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Shadeheart: Dark gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Goldenpaw

Quailfeather: Gray tom with white paws

Volefur: Brown, long-furred tom

Marshspring: Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Fernpaw

Streamleaf: Silver tabby she-cat

Skywillow: Gray-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Dustpaw

Morningwhisper: Cream-colored tabby she-cat

Creamflower: Pale ginger she-cat

Sagepetal: Cream-colored long-furred tabby she-cat

Sandrunner: Pale ginger tom with white paws

Starlingflight: Dark gray tabby tom

Blackmoon: Black tom with white paws

Olivewing: Black she-cat

Coppertail: Ginger tabby tom

Dawnlight: Ginger-and-white she-caf

Squirrelfrost: Dark ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Pineberry: Reddish ginger tom

Apprentices:

Dustpaw: Dusty brown tom with yellow eyes

Fernpaw: Light gray speckled she-cat with green eyes

Goldenpaw: Yellow tabby she-cat with white paws, and tail tip

Queens:

Leopardflame: Yellow spotted tabby she-cat, mother to Marshspring's kits:

Cedarkit: Golden-brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Brownkit: Brown tom-kit with darker paws

Plumwhisker: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes, mother to Starlingflight's kits:

Graykit: Gray tom-kit with yellow eyes

Fogkit: Mottled gray-and-white tom-kit with blue eyes

Rainkit: Gray tabby she-kit with blue eyes

Robinflight: Red-and-brown she-cat, mother to Sandrunner's kit:

Adderkit: Red tabby tom-kit with yellow eyes

Elders:

Thistlescratch: Yellow tabby tom

Swanwing: Long-furred white she-cat with gray paws and ears

Cats Outside the Clans

Moon's Group

Moon: Black she-cat with yellow eyes

Dawn: Ginger tabby she-cat

Wolf: Large, thick-furred gray tom

Ace: Black-and-white tom

Clover: Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Hazel: Pale ginger she-cat with a white chest and paws

Spark: Yellow tabby tom

Cinder: Long-furred gray tom

Maple: Orange-and-black tom with yellow eyes

Pearl: Creamy white she-cat

Thistle: Brown tabby tom with tufty fur

Prologue

Sedgefang scented the air, whiskers twitching. She was on patrol with Liontooth, Dovewillow, and Cindershade.

"Kittypet." Liontooth muttered beside her, growling under his breath. Sedgefang could smell it too, but that made sense as they were close to the twolegplace border. But this scent was stronger than usual, and made Sedgefang worried.

Dovewillow stopped. "A tom. Fresh, too." Worry flashed in her yellow eyes. "Is he planning on attacking SummerClan?"

Liontooth snorted. "Of course not. Kittypets are weak and hare-brained. They'd never be able to plan something like that." He paused. "And I only smell one."

Cindershade lashed her tail. "That doesn't mean there aren't more. We should keep an eye out."

"But we still have to finish the patrol." Sedgefang growled. "AutumnClan has been pushing the border, the arrogant furballs." Murmurs of angry agreement sounded among the cats.

"Then let's keep going." Liontooth grunted stubbornly. Sedgefang reluctantly followed. AutumnClan weren't the only arrogant furballs in the forest. Liontooth thought as the deputy he had a right to boss everyone around. *And he's right, but he doesn't have to be so smug about it!*

An idea popped into Sedgefang's head. "What if you three keep going and I check out the scent?" *It'll give me some alone time, away from Liontooth.*

Dovewillow brushed against her. "What if there are more kittypets? You can't take them on by yourself." Worry laced her mew.

Cindershade nodded. "Or you could run into an AutumnClan

patrol."

Sedgefang flicked her tail dismissively. "I'll be fine." She asserted. "I'll check it out and come right back."

"It doesn't sound like a bad idea," Liontooth mewed. "I'll let you go." Dovewillow was still looking reluctant, but she said nothing as Sedgefang padded off. *Let me go? I let myself go. I didn't need his permission.*

Sedgefang continued to brood as she absentmindedly followed the scent trail. It led in a beeline to twolegplace, and looped around as if the cat had ventured into the forest, then turned back home. *This isn't going to be a threat, like I thought. Dovewillow worries too much.*

Sedgefang was surprised when she stumbled across a patch of blood on the ground. The scent told her that the kittypet had caught a mouse then ate it. *A kittypet catching prey?* She shook her head. *My nose must be playing tricks on me.*

As she went in to check again, a mew sounded behind her. "You won't be finding any more food there, I'm afraid."

Sedgefang whipped around to see a dark gray fluffy tom sitting rather comfortably on a tree branch. His long tail twitched below him, and his green eyes shone with humor. This was no doubt the kittypet she had been scenting; his breath reeked of mouse and he looked like he hadn't missed a meal in a while.

"What are you doing here? Who are you?" She hissed, not liking the fact that he was above her on the branch.

He began cleaning a paw. "That was one good mouse." His whiskers twitched with amusement. "Who are *you?* You look quite thin. You could use a meal or two at my den. My housefolk would be more than happy to welcome you."

Housefolk? This tom knew some strange words. But her irritation overruled her curiosity. "I would never accept food from a *twoleg*. I'd rather starve." She lashed her tail before continuing. "Besides, I asked first. Who are you and what are you doing on my territory?"

The tom let out a purr of laughter. "Well, it isn't exactly your territory, but I'm Dusty. Now answer my question." He said in a tone that was too friendly for this conversation, in Sedgefang's opinion.

How did he know that wasn't my territory? She realized she had passed the border in her search. But the kittypet had no way of knowing, unless he had figured it out himself. A flicker of admiration made her paws tingle. *He caught a mouse, knows how to climb, and knew I passed the border when even I didn't.*

"Well?" Dusty pressed. Sedgefang realized he had asked her a question, and her pelt grew hot. "Sorry. I'm Sedgefang." She replied.

Dusty let out an amused *mrrow*. "What an odd name." Sedgefang felt the fur on her back prickle. "No odder than yours." She remarked.

He leaped down from the branch with surprising grace, stopping in front of Sedgefang. "True," he began. "Maybe life in your group is odd, but only to me." He licked his paw again, this time pausing to drag it over his ear as he spoke. "And to you, life as a-what did you call me? A kittypet?-is odd."

Sedgefang had never thought of it that way. It was clear this kittypet had thought about this before. She realized she was staring at him while she was thinking, and quickly averted her gaze, pelt hot with embarrassment. Dusty chuckled.

"What is life in the group like anyways? Maybe then I won't think it's so weird." He said. Sedgefang smiled. "Maybe I should tell you sometime." She stopped, cursing herself. *Sometime? I've just met this cat, and I'm already planning on seeing him again?*

A sudden thought made Sedgefang distracted from Dusty. *Where are my Clanmates? I told them I'd get right back.* "What's wrong?" Dusty asked.

"I have to get back to my Clanmates." She said. Dusty sighed. "Oh, okay." He brushed his cheek against hers, and Sedgefang's heart sped up.

"When can I see you again?" He asked. Sedgefang smiled. "Tomorrow. Same place, same time."

Dusty nodded. "I'll be there." As Sedgefang left for her Clanmates, she realized she had felt happier with this cat she hardly knew than with the cats she had known her whole life.

I haven't known him long, she mused. *But I know he's part of my destiny.*

Chapter One

Nettlekit nestled into his mother's warmth, eyes shut tightly. He was supposed to have opened them already, but he wasn't ready. *What if it hurts? What if I don't like what everything looks like?* He worried.

"What if he never opens his eyes?" The gentle voice that he'd learned was his mother's spoke. This time, she wasn't speaking to him. She was talking to another queen, worry in her tone.

"Don't fret about it." The she-cat said. "Finchkit took longer than Thornkit. He's just taking his time."

That's Hickoryfall, Nettlekit remembered. She was Thornkit and Finchkit's mother. Sometimes Nettlekit wondered what they looked like, but he was too nervous to open his eyes and check.

"Maybe he'll never open his eyes." He heard Thornkit remark. "Or maybe *kittypets* just take longer." He felt his mother bristle beside him, but it was Hickoryfall who spoke first.

She hissed. "No kit of mine is that rude! Dustcloud is as much a part of this Clan as you and I, and so is Nettlekit! Having kittypet blood won't change that." Nettlekit let out a tiny sigh. Dustcloud, his father, was once a kittypet called Dusty. He had joined SummerClan a few moons before he was born, and only now was he beginning to be accepted.
Still, Thornkit didn't think of Nettlekit as part of the Clan, clearly.

I'll show him! Nettlekit thought defiantly. *I'll open my eyes* now*!* He pushed back his doubts and slowly opened his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed by the hugeness of everything. Light made him squint, but he could still see the cats around him.

Woah... Thornkit and Finchkit were *huge,* at least compared to himself. Their golden-brown pelts shone in the sun.

"Look, he's opened his eyes!" Nettlekit looked up at Hickoryfall. If

he thought Thornkit was big, then she was a giant. Of course, all full-grown cats probably were. She was the same shade of brown as her kits, who were sitting beside her in her nest.

"Really?" His mother asked excitedly. As he looked up at her, he saw that her eyes were blue and her pelt was a mix of gray and white. "Oh, they're exactly like his father's." She murmured, gaze warm.

"They're beautiful, Sedgefang." Hickoryfall assured Nettlekit's mother. Nettlekit looked down at his paws, which looked similar to hers. The gray was a bit darker, and he had more of it than white on his pelt, but other than that he was pleased by how much they looked alike.

Hickoryfall turned to her kits. "Why don't you two take Nettlekit out of the den? Now that he's opened his eyes he can explore." Nettlekit tried not to let his tail droop. He was excited to go out of the den, but no doubt Thornkit would be an annoying furball. *He thinks he's better than me! I'll show him.*

"Okay." Thornkit mewed, turning briefly to Nettlekit, gaze undreadable. "Come on." They turned around to pad out of the den, and Nettlekit was about to follow but he turned back to Sedgefang first.

"Go ahead." His mother assured. "Just be nice." Nettlekit bounded forward to catch up with them, pelt prickling with irritation. *She should be telling that to Thornkit!*

"Don't wake Brambleflower!" Hickoryfall called from the den. Nettlekit avoided the sleeping queen and exited the den, stepping into camp for the first time. He was in awe at the sheer size of the camp, and how many warriors were strolling around. *It must be great to be a full warrior!* He thought gleefully. *I can't wait until I get my name.*

Thornkit turned to Nettlekit, amusement sparking in his yellow depths. "Amazed at what being a Clan cat is like?" Nettlekit nodded. Thornkit snorted. "Don't get used to it. A kittypet can never be a warrior anyways."

Nettlekit bristled. "I'm no kittypet!" He protested. "I was Clanborn, just like you." Thornkit let out an amused *mrrow*. "So what? You're part kittypet. You'll never be half the warrior I am. My father is *deputy!*"

Finchkit padded up beside her brother. "Don't be mean." She hissed. "Nettlekit can't help his parentage." But she still looked down at him, seemingly still judging him. Nettlekit couldn't tell if she felt sorry for him, or was thinking about his father. *If only I had a warrior for a father like every other cat!*

Nettlekit felt guilt wash over his pelt. *My father* is *a warrior. I shouldn't be ashamed of him.*

Thornkit rolled his eyes. "Fine. Let's show the kit around camp, shall we?" Nettlekit lashed his tail. "I have a name, you know."

"Whatever." The older kit muttered. Finchkit cast one last apologetic glance at Nettlekit, then turned to follow her brother.

I'll show them! Nettlekit thought angrily. *I'll show them all! My father is the best warrior in SummerClan, and I will be too one day!* He cast a glance at Thornkit. *Better than* him.

Nettlekit stifled a purr of amusement and followed after the older kits, tail held high. He was meeting his Clan for the first time, so he had to make a good impression! *They have probably already judged me anyway because of Dustcloud.* He thought with a sigh.

Thornkit led him to a dead tree with a hollowed-out inside. It was filled with faint cat-scent, but lichens and plants covered the entrance so he couldn't see in.

Nettlekit turned to Thornkit. "What's that?" He inquired, taking another glance at the tree-den.

"You'll have to go in to find out." Thornkit said with a sneer. Finchkit flicked him with her tail. "Thornkit!" She mewed sharply, but she too was holding back laughter. *Why are they laughing?* Nettlekit wondered, unsheathing his claws and sheathing them again. *Is it because they think I can't do it?*

When Nettlekit didn't respond, Thornkit took a step forward. "Well, are you going to? Or are you too *scared*?" He hissed.

Nettlekit wasn't going to let that slide. "Of course not!" He turned back toward the den. *It's just a den, and an empty one at that. What could go wrong?* "I'll go in now!"

He walked into the den without a second thought, pushing aside the plants as he went. There was nothing special about it, just a single moss nest and some scattered prey bones. It looked like a cat had slept there recently, but whoever it was wasn't there then.

"There's no-" he began, turning back toward the kits, but found himself nose to nose with a long-furred and rather intimidating she-cat. A pale ginger tom stood behind her, his gaze seeming to pierce Nettlekit's pelt.

"Nettlekit." The silver she-cat spoke, her stern gaze bearing down on him. "What are you doing in my den?"

It made sense now. The actual den wasn't the thing Nettlekit should have been afraid to enter-it was the cat who lived in it. And the fact that there was only one nest in there, which meant the cat who slept there was important enough to have a den all to herself.

"Featherstar." Nettlekit greeted the leader, his voice shaking. "I..." he trailed off, panicking. *That's why Thornkit and Finchkit were laughing! It wasn't because they didn't think I could do it, it was because they knew I would!*

"It's alright," the leader purred, surprising Nettlekit. "All kits want to explore, and most kits find their way in here at some point or another. I just want to know what you were doing." Her gaze flashed with amusement. "Snooping around?"

Nettlekit stood a bit taller, finding his voice. "I, uh, was exploring and Thornkit told me to go in here..." he trailed off as Liontooth gave him a cold glare.

"My son would never lead you to somewhere you shouldn't be, surely?" Liontooth challenged. Nettlekit flattened his ears to his

head.

Featherstar silenced him with a look. "Liontooth, he's just a kit. Kits do hare-brained things all the time, your son included." Turning back to the three kits, she continued. "Now if you'll excuse us we were going to talk in my den."

Finchkit perked up. "Talk about what?"

Liontooth flicked her ear with his tail. "First of all, none of your business." He purred, his mew warm to his daughter but his eyes cold as he glared at Featherstar. "Second of all, it's only boring Clan things you wouldn't be interested in." Then he turned and followed Featherstar into her den.

Thornkit turned to Nettlekit. "Stupid furball!" He snapped, eyes gleaming. "It was just a joke. You didn't have to rat me out to the leader!"

Nettlekit bristled. "You didn't have to make me walk into the leader's own den!" He lashed his tail. "I'm lucky your father didn't claw my ears off."

Finchkit stepped in. "*Neither* of you had to be annoying furballs to each other. Let's just go back to the nursery and play like normal kits." She turned to Nettlekit. "Come on, we can team up against Thornkit in moss-ball."

Nettlekit paused. That sounded like fun, but part of him couldn't help but remember how she didn't stop him from going right into the leader's den. But the offer was too good to resist. "Okay," he said with a grin. "Prepare to get beaten, Thornkit."

Thornkit purred with laughter. "I can beat you two any day!" As the three kits bounded off, Nettlekit had to hold back a grin. *One day, Thornkit. One day I'll prove myself to you, and you'll never look down on me again!*

Chapter Two

"Wake up, kittypet!"

Thornkit's sneer woke Nettlekit from his dream of chasing a rabbit. He was just about to catch it when his denmate woke him.

"What?" Nettlekit grumbled, rolling over. "I was sleeping!"

Thornkit let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "It's almost *sun-high*!"

That caused Nettlekit to wake instantly. "What?" He looked out the nursery, eyes wide. Indeed, the sun was already up and cats were strolling around camp. Thornkit had been exaggerating a bit, but it was later than he normally slept in.

It had been a few moons since Nettlekit had opened his eyes and Thornkit and Finchkit showed him around the camp. Every day, the three had become more rambunctious and closer and closer to being apprentices.

"Well?" Thornkit snapped. "Are you going to come out to camp with us, or what?" Nettlekit nodded, standing up and shaking out his pelt as if to shake off the sleepiness.

Nettlekit followed the two out of the den, squinting in the sudden light. He saw Thornkit and Finchkit ahead of him, and he sprang forward to catch up. *It seems every day I get closer and closer to their size!* Nettlekit thought triumphantly. *I can't wait to be an apprentice.*

Lost in thought, Nettlekit found himself in front of a light brown she-cat. He had almost hit her in his rush toward the older kits.

Windpaw hissed at him. "Watch it!" She snapped, putting down the bundle of moss she had been carrying. Her and her brother had just been made apprentices. Windpaw was training as a warrior while her brother Mudpaw had chosen the path of a medicine cat.

"Sorry." He mewed, darting around her more carefully this time. She

gave him one more sharp glance before picking her moss up again and heading toward the elder's den.

Nettlekit mumbled another apology and approached the other kits, being much more careful this time. Finchkit was saying something to Thornkit, which made him laugh. Nettlekit couldn't quite hear what Thornkit said next, but he picked up "Maybe kittypets sleep longer!" Nettlekit growled under his breath.

Pretending not to hear, he stopped beside his denmates. "What today? Going to make me walk into the medicine cat den?" He mewed humorously, pushing back his anger.

Finchkit purred. "The elder's den, actually. Brightpetal has the best stories." Nettlekit's mood brightened. Not only did she indeed have great stories, Brightpetal was Sedgefang's mother which made her kin. Nettlekit loved spending time with her.

Thornkit, however, didn't look as pleased. "Elders are grumpy and stinky. I hope I'm never an elder." He puffed out his chest. "I'd rather be a warrior any day."

Finchkit glared at her brother. "Don't be hare-brained. You'd be lucky to be an elder one day, considering how reckless you are." Thornkit shoved her, making her giggle softly.

Nettlekit felt a pang of sadness at this. *I've always wished I had littermates,* he thought. *But I'm almost glad I don't if it would mean having to deal with someone like Thornkit all the time.*

Then again, Nettlekit pretty much had to play with Thornkit as much as if he was his own sibling.

Finchkit led the way to the elder's den, tail held high. Thornkit reluctantly followed, and Nettlekit trailed behind him. When they entered the elder's den, Brightpetal was already in a wild story of being chased by a fox. Windpaw, who had just been in there to give the elders new bedding, was now listening intently.

"I ran until I thought I couldn't any longer," Brightpetal was saying. "The fox had chased me all the way to the SpringClan border!

Which, as you probably know, is a river. There was no way I could cross it, and I couldn't go onto another Clan's territory!"

"She's making it up as she goes," Wolfpelt mewed, whiskers twitching. "This is going to get wilder and wilder."

Flowerstream, who sat beside him, flicked his muzzle with her tail. "Hush, the story's getting interesting."

Seemingly not hearing them, Brightpetal continued. "I thought, what could I do? I couldn't swim! I was sure I was crow-food when the fox arrived, but then I got an idea. I turned to face the fox, pretending to be giving up. I could see a loose tree root in the bank of the river behind me, and I got an idea. I willed the fox to leap after me, because the plan would only work if it did. Then I leaped off the edge, fox on my tail, but just before I hit the water I grabbed the tree root. The fox wasn't as lucky. We didn't see it in our territory for a long while!" Brightpetal let out a purr of laughter. "Then I used the root to climb to safety."

Wolfpelt sighed. "You did no such thing," Nettlekit heard him mutter. "That day, if I remember right, on a hunting patrol you thought there was a fox behind you when it was only a rabbit. You were scared out of your fur!" He mewed, eyes gleaming.

"I remember that." Flowerstream mewed, purring with laughter. "That was the most eventful patrol we'd had in moons."

Brightpetal lowered her head, embarrassed. "Well, maybe I did get a little scared." She admitted, casting a glance at Nettlekit. "Hello, kits. What brings you here today?"

Finchkit stepped forward. "We wanted to hear a story!" Beside her, Thornkit rolled his eyes but she ignored him.

Windpaw, about to leave the den, gave them a look. "Don't ask for a story if you don't want to be here until sun-high." She purred. "They are great, though. I hope I have that many exciting stories when I'm an elder."

"StarClan willing." Wolfpelt said quietly. Flowerstream nodded as

Windpaw exited the den, while Nettlekit felt unsettled by his grim tone.

Brightpetal was twitching her tail thoughtfully. "A story, you say?" She cast them a warm look. "About what? Anything in particular?"

Nettlekit had an idea, but didn't want to share it. Thornkit already looked on edge, and him sharing it might cause him to make fun of Nettlekit. *I wonder if Finchkit has any requests,* he thought, but the golden she-kit was looking at him.

"Spit it out," Brightpetal said. "Nettlekit, your mother has the same look when she wants to say something but isn't. You can't fool me," she purred.

Nettlekit shifted. He was glad there was another similarity between him and his mother, but was a bit upset that Brightpetal had called him out on it. "Okay..." he began. "I was wondering if you could tell me what caused my father-Dustcloud-to come to SummerClan. Like, how he was at first and..." he trailed off, realizing that he was beginning to ramble. *As if they don't already think I'm a ditzy featherbrain!*

But Brightpetal was nodding, looking lost in a memory. "I remember the day that Sedgefang brought your father into camp. None of us quite knew what was going on, but we quickly realized. Your parents were head over paws for each other," she mewed, eyes holding a teasing glint.

Nettlekit licked his chest fur, a bit embarrassed at hearing about his parents. He could hear Thornkit scoff, but the tom seemed to be refusing to make eye contact.

"Featherstar was a younger leader then, and she didn't like Dustcloud, who was called Dusty then, being in our camp. Of course, one former kittypet wasn't a threat, but he was making everyone uneasy, and caused a few arguements." Brightpetal continued.

"What did you think of him?" Finchkit asked, eyes stretched wide in interest.

The elder purred. "I didn't know what Sedgefang was thinking, but I didn't mind. He was lightening the mood in camp, and everyone soon began to trust him. He was just that kind of cat."

Nettlekit did love hearing about his father. When he spoke with him, it was hard to imaging the confident, kind, and amazing hunter had once been a kittypet, but it seemed that was all the Clan saw him as, especially back then.

Brightpetal flicked Nettlekit with her tail, causing him to stumble a bit. "Soon, Featherstar became comfortable around him and allowed him to be made a warrior. Sedgefang was so happy for him." Her eyes were distant again. "No cat could doubt that he was a great addition to our Clan."

Finchkit purred. "I guess so." Thornkit still didn't look convinced. "I still think having a kittypet in our Clan is a weakness." He hissed. "And now his tainted blood will flow through the Clan," he finished with a sharp glance at Nettlekit.

Nettlekit glared at his denmate, but the elders didn't seem to have heard his remark. "Now, I need a break. We've had a lot of young cats here today," Brightpetal purred.

"Yes, it's so tiring telling stories all day." Wolfpelt mewed sarcastically. Brightpetal cast him a fake glare.

"I guess we should be going then." Finchkit said sadly. Nettlekit nodded, and Thornkit gave him a triumphant glance. *You got away with it this time, but you won't stay mean to me once we're both warriors and I've proven myself!*

As the three left the den, Thornkit and Finchkit began to talk in hushed whispers and soft purrs of laughter again, leaving Nettlekit left out once again. With no other option, he returned to the nursery where his mother was having a conversation with Hickoryfall.

"Hello, Nettlekit." She purred. "Where have you been?" He curled up next to her, knowing he was a bit too old for sleeping next to her but not caring at that point. *Thornkit and Finchkit aren't around*

anyway.

"We went to the elder's den." He mewed, his response muffled in Sedgefang's gray-and-white fur.

He could feel her purring. "Did Brightpetal have a story for you?" She asked, fondness for her own mother in her mew.

"Yeah," Nettlekit replied, not wanting to elaborate. He was thankful for his mother being there, and for a moment he could forget his loneliness at having no siblings. *I'll still have her, no matter what.*

At that thought, he was able to sleep at his mother's side.

Chapter Three

"Thornpaw! Finchpaw! Thornpaw! Finchpaw!" The Clan encouraged the two newest apprentices. Nettlekit couldn't help but feel jealous, as he had to wait another two moons before he could be apprenticed as well.

At least I won't have to share a den with them for a while, Nettlekit thought. *But Thornpaw will be more arrogant than ever.*

Speaking of sharing a den, three new kits had just recently been born to Mistdapple and Birchclaw. Their names were Hailkit, Creekkit, and Cloudkit, and they were already loud enough to keep Nettlekit awake at night. Not getting enough sleep had made him grumpier than usual.

As cats stepped forward to congratulate SummerClan's two newest apprentices, Nettlekit saw his father come to greet him.

"Hey, Nettlekit." He purred. Perhaps seeing his forlorn look, Dustcloud continued. "It'll be your turn soon enough."

Nettlekit sighed. "It feels like forever." Dustcloud's gaze turned sympathetic. "Oh, come on. It'll come before you know it." *How would you know?* Nettlekit thought bitterly. *You were never an apprentice.*

Dustcloud licked his ear. "Would you like to go out of camp with me for a little trip?" He offered. Nettlekit perked up at the idea. *I've never been out of camp before!* But that was immediately replaced by frustration again. "Aren't kits not allowed out of camp until they're apprentices?" He asked.

Dustcloud nodded. "But I'll go with you, so you're fine." Nettlekit nodded, gaining excitement again. *I guess it'll be a good distraction from Thornpaw and Finchpaw being made apprentices.*

As his father led him out of camp, Nettlekit took in the scenery

around him. Most likely he wouldn't see it again until he was apprenticed, so he had to remember this.

As they exited the camp, the rocky earth gave way to seemingly endless hilly land, with scraggly trees dotting the horizon. From there, Nettlekit could see farther than he'd ever seen before. The trees grew thicker in one direction, and in the other the land grew flatter, leading to a rushing river. Wind whipped his pelt and stung his eyes, and the whole feel gave Nettlekit a strong urge to run until he reached the horizon. *I never thought the world was this* huge!

Dustcloud turned to Nettlekit, whiskers twitching in amusement. "You like it?" Nettlekit nodded. "It makes me feel so *alive,*" he breathed.

His father purred. "I've always preferred the trees near AutumnClan's border, but you're a natural SummerClan cat at heart." Dustcloud's eyed sparked with joy. "Want to check out the forest?"

"Sure," Nettlekit agreed reluctantly. He was half-hoping to be able to explore the endless rolling hills and flat land, but clearly his father was more interested in the woodland. *I'll have to know both areas to become a warrior anyways,* he decided.

He followed his father for a long ways, feeling the sun grow hotter on his fur as it crept closer and closer to sun-high. Soon, the shade of the forest cooled his pelt, but he felt unnaturally covered by the endless leaves and branches overhead. *I can't imagine how AutumnClan lives like this all the time!* He mused.

Dustcloud, however, seemed at home. His father walked as comfortably among the roots and undergrowth as Nettlekit had out in the open. *He's such a great warrior! Maybe being different makes him better.* Nettlekit realized.

His father's eyes flashed mischievously. "Come along, I'm going to teach you to do something most SummerClan warriors can't do." Excitement and curiosity made Nettlekit's paws prickle as Dustcloud led him to a tall, thick-trunked tree with many branches reaching to the sky.

"We're going to climb that," Dustcloud mewed as they arrived at the base of the trunk.

"*Climb* that?" Nettlekit asked, surprised. As far as he knew, most SummerClan warriors didn't like to climb trees, and avoided it. *Leave tree-climbing for AutumnClan,* Nettlekit remembered a senior warrior saying. *I'd rather chase rabbits in the open hillside any day.*

But he'd heard his father right. "Yes, climb it!" Dustcloud purred. "Some cat I used to know taught me how. Now I'll pass it on to you." His eyes gleamed with a distant memory.

Nettlekit was still skeptical. "How far up will we go?" Surely a fall from that height could seriously injure a cat.

Dustcloud flicked his tail dismissively. "Not all the way up. Come on, it's easy. I'll show you." Without any further explanation, Dustcloud gripped the base of the trunk, and began to inch his way up. Nettlekit stifled a laugh; he looked like a squirrel.

"I know it looks silly," his father mewed from a ways up the tree. "But it works! Don't forget to use your claws, and always keep at least three paws on the tree. That way you'll be sure not to fall."

Might as well humor him, Nettlekit decided. Approaching the trunk, he stood on his hind legs and used his forepaws to hook into the trunk. Digging into the bark, he lifted his hind legs off the ground and grasped the tree tightly, almost falling down before catching himself.

Above him, Dustcloud purred. "You'll get the hang of it." His father rested on a sturdy branch, tail twitching below him.

Nettlekit found his balance and started creeping up the tree, putting one paw in front of another. He quickly got into a rhythm, and soon arrived at a low branch. Nettlekit heaved himself up onto it, looking up in dismay at his father who was halfway up the tree. *Never mind that,* he thought, trying to catch his breath. *I'll catch up.*

"Good, good!" Dustcloud praised him as he began to climb again. "You're doing great for your age. When you're older you'll scamper

up trees as easy as a squirrel!" Nettlekit gripped his claws deeper into the bark in frustration. *I don't want to be a squirrel. I want to be a warrior!*

He saw that Dustcloud was waiting for him in the branch overhead, and he pulled himself up. Nettlekit's claws and limbs ached, and he resisted the urge to look down. He knew that they were over halfway up the tree; any fall now could kill him.

Dustcloud licked Nettlekit's ear reassuringly. "You did great. We won't go any further now, the branches are getting too thin. But look at the view!" Nettlekit dug his claws deeper into the branch, taking a glance out between the leaves. He could see farther than when they had just exited camp, and suddenly he was less bitter at having to climb the tree.

"Dustcloud? Nettlekit? Is that you two up there?" A voice startled him out of his trance. His father's ears perked and he started to climb down the tree in search of the cat who had called to them. Nettlekit half fell, half scrambled down the trunk after Dustcloud.

Oh no... Nettlekit saw the new apprentices standing at the base of the tree, looking up at him. The cat who had called up to him had been Stonesong, Finchpaw's mentor. Beside them, Cloverwing and her apprentice Thornpaw looked up curiously.

Thornpaw sneered. "Look at the kittypet, climbing trees with his father. Where did he learn that, from his soft kittypet friends?"

Cloverwing cuffed him on the ear. "Don't speak to a warrior like that!" She turned to Dustcloud. "I apologize. He'll make a great warrior, if he can only get past his sharp tongue."

Dustcloud dismissed it with a flick of his tail, though Nettlekit's pelt burned with anger and embarrassment. "Actually, I learned it from my own father. Now I'm just passing it on to my son," he said briskly.

Stonesong purred, but his gaze was serious as he looked at Dustcloud. "You know kits usually aren't allowed out of camp, and it's not exactly safe climbing trees. You could have waited until he

was an apprentice to take him out."

Dustcloud smiled at Nettlekit. "I know that, but he's safe under my protection." Nettlekit held back a purr. *At least some cat cares about me!* Stonesong didn't look convinced, but he also didn't argue.

Thornpaw hissed at Nettlekit again. "Just because you think you're so cool climbing your trees, doesn't mean you'll ever be a great warrior like me!" Nettlekit snarled with rage, but this time he interjected before Cloverwing could discipline her apprentice once more.

"You think you can climb it? Go on. If you're such the great warrior you say you are, this should be *easy*!" He snapped. "Come on!"

Thornpaw growled. "I'm not going to climb a tree to hide like a kittypet."

Nettlekit lashed his tail. "You don't have to hide. Just climb to the first branch." He paused. "Or are you too scared to try?"

He saw Stonesong and Cloverwing exchange a glance, and Dustcloud's gaze made his pelt prickle. He could almost read their minds: *well, no cat can get hurt. It'll help solve their dispute. Where's the problem in that?*

Thornpaw lashed his tail back and forth, but gave in. "Fine, I'll climb your stupid tree. It'll be easy enough." Nettlekit watched the apprentice strut over to the tree warily, confidence prickling in his pelt. *I could barely do it with my father's help. Thornpaw won't get past the first clawhold.*

The apprentice sniffed the tree carefully, reaching up with his forepaw to grasp the bark. "This is hare-brained," he muttered.

"If it's that easy, then get on with it." Nettlekit retorted. Thornpaw rolled his eyes. "Fine, I will." But when he placed his other paw on the tree, he didn't sink his claws in deep enough and had to fall back to four paws. Thornpaw grunted and tried again, while Nettlekit's whiskers twitched in pleasure.

The golden tom finally landed four paws on the trunk, but couldn't

seem to find his footing. Thornpaw reached up with a paw to try and climb further up, but his hind paw slipped as he did and Thornpaw fell back. *Just like Dustcloud taught me!* Nettlekit thought, amused. *Always keep at least three paws on the tree!*

Tail twitching, Thornpaw looked up at Nettlekit. "Give up yet?" Nettlekit asked.

Thornpaw hissed. "Just because you can climb trees doesn't make you a real warrior! I'll always be better than you, *kittypet!*"

As Nettlekit bristled, Cloverwing stepped in. "We might as well get on with the tour of our territory," she mewed. "We've had enough adventure for one day." As the patrol left, Finchpaw cast Nettlekit an apologetic glance but he ignored it.

I showed him that time, Nettlekit thought, paws tingling with pleasure. *Will he ever realize I'll be just as great a warrior as he will, if not better?*

Chapter Four

Nettlekit woke with a start, roused by a commotion outside of the den. The dawn patrol was returning, but they didn't seem happy.

Birchclaw, his apprentice Emberpaw, Turtlespots, and the new warriors Nightsong and Badgerfoot entered camp, pelts ruffled and tails twitching. Featherstar approached them, looking as confused as Nettlekit felt. "What is it?" She asked.

Birchclaw faced the leader, bristling. "We found AutumnClan scent all over the border."

Emberpaw chimed in. "And there was evidence they killed prey." Nettlekit held back a growl. *How dare they!*

Featherstar flicked her tail. "Are you sure it wasn't just blown over to our side? We don't want to provoke them if it is unnecessary."

Turtlespots narrowed his eyes. "Their scent was well on our side. It's clear they were hunting."

Liontooth hissed. "Arrogant furballs! How dare they hunt on our territory!"

"We should attack them now!" Scorchtail yowled. "They need to know SummerClan is strong!"

"Enough!" Featherstar called. "We will not attack without proof. We will question them at the next Gathering, but not anything further." A few murmurs of agreement were heard, but the yowls of protest were louder.

Liontooth thrust his muzzle to his leader's. "If we *don't* attack, then we'll look weak!" He stalked around his leader. "We can't just let them steal prey, can we?" He challenged.

"We can't attack without reason, either." Featherstar snapped.

"There is a reason!" Birchclaw shouted. "They're stealing prey!"

Featherstar silenced the protesting cats with a look. "I have made my decision." She said firmly. "We will alert AutumnClan at the Gathering. If it is best, we will attack. If not, we will leave this be." Before more cats could argue, she continued. "But we will remain strong. And there's something I can do now to make sure SummerClan is strong and ready for battle if necessary."

"Nettlekit, please step forward."

Nettlekit's heart skipped a beat. *I'm becoming an apprentice?* His paws tingled with joy as he took a shaky step forward, but not before taking a hesitant glance at his mother.

"Look at you. Becoming an apprentice and you look like you've been pulled backwards through a bramble thicket!" His mother exclaimed. After a few swift licks, she sighed and nudged him forward. "Go on. Your Clan is waiting." Nettlekit could see pride in her eyes and in Dustcloud's, who was next to his mate.

Featherstar looked down on him warmly from the branches of the Clantree. "Nettlekit, you have reached the age of six moons and are ready to be apprenticed. It is rare for me to perform this ceremony for only one kit, but I believe you'll only be a strength to our Clan." Nettlekit felt excitement wash over his pelt. *I can't believe this is really happening!*

"From this day forward, until you have received your warrior name, you will be known as Nettlepaw. Your mentor will be Applebreeze. I hope she will pass down all she knows to you." As the young tortoiseshell padded forward, disbelief in her green eyes, Nettlepaw realized how lucky he was. *She's still young, and not old and strict like the senior warriors. I'm glad she's my mentor.*

"Applebreeze." Featherstar mewed. "You are young, but no cat could doubt your strength and loyalty. You are ready to take on an apprentice. You will be the mentor of Nettlepaw, and I expect you to pass on everything you know to him."

Nettlepaw could hardly believe his ears as his Clan cheerfully cried

his name. *I'm an apprentice!* He touched his nose to his new mentor's, feeling ready to explode with joy and pride. *I'll be a warrior soon, and Thornpaw better watch his tail!*

Nettlepaw bounded over to his mentor as soon as the cheers quieted. Featherstar dismissed the Clan, though pelts remained ruffled. *She knows how to calm the Clan down,* he observed. *But I don't care! I'm an apprentice at last!*

Applebreeze greeted him, eyes warm. "Hello, Nettlepaw."

"Can we explore the territory? Will we hunt or fight first? Ooh, will we be able to fight AutumnClan?" His new mentor twitched her whiskers. "We will do nothing of the sort. Leave fighting to the warriors. Besides, I was thinking we'd go collecting moss."

Nettlepaw groaned. "But that's the most boring thing!" He definitely didn't want to spend his first day as apprentice picking up moss for the elders.

Applebreeze flicked her tail over his muzzle. "We will do it and we will do it without complaining." She snapped. "Don't worry, we'll do something different tomorrow." Still frustrated, Nettlepaw padded out of the camp with his tail held low. *I can't believe Thornpaw and Finchpaw got to see the territory on their first day, and I get stuck collecting moss!*

The tortoiseshell led Nettlepaw to a large maple tree, even bigger than the tree Dustcloud had taken him climbing a few sunrises earlier. Moss and lichen grew thickly on its bark and roots, as well as lining the stones around it.

"This is the Blazing Maple." Applebreeze explained. "See how it's split in half there, and blackened?" Nettlepaw nodded. "It was struck by lightning many seasons ago. That's partly why it has its name, but during leaf-fall it turns a fiery red color before its leaves fall. It's a great place to collect moss, as it likes to grow all over the bark, and to train. But it's not entirely safe either, as the branches are weak from being struck all those moons ago, so no climbing."

Nettlepaw gazed up at the vast branches in awe, half-listening to

Applebreeze speak. When she said his name, he snapped out of his thoughts. "Watch, Nettlepaw. This is how to remove moss, while leaving the earth behind. You'll want to use your claws."

He watched as Applebreeze unsheathed her claws on one paw, and dragged it across the moss. She picked up a clean, straight strip of bedding, free of earth and roots. "If you're not careful, you'll go too deep and cut the bark or go too shallow and tear up the moss. You can practice on this thinner stuff over here, but when you're ready you can move on to the thick, dry moss. Be sure to be careful, this is going to the elders."

A bit overwhelmed, Nettlepaw padded over to a patch of moss on one of the maple's roots, and followed Applebreeze's instructions. Unsheathing his claws all the way, he slowly dragged them under the moss, trying to cut off as clean a piece as possible. After he was done, he lifted it up. "This good?" He mewed, muffled by the plants in his mouth.

Applebreeze stifled a purr. "It's alright, a bit thin though. That won't keep out much cold. Try again, maybe go a bit deeper this time." Pelt pricking with frustration, Nettlepaw went back over to the root. *It can't be that difficult to gather moss!*

Trying to claw deeper, Nettlepaw sliced a second piece of moss, this time finding it easier to separate it from the wood. The moss he lifted was thicker this time, and he turned to Applebreeze. "Better?"

She nodded, purring. "You're doing great. Why don't we move over to here, and we'll try to gather some bedding."

Nettlepaw and Applebreeze worked side by side for a while, tearing off strips of moss, laughing and talking as they went. *Maybe moss gathering isn't as bad as I thought,* Nettlepaw mused. *Though I'd much rather be hunting or fighting.*

Applebreeze turned to face Nettlepaw, and he realized his claws were aching from being used so long. "Though you may not feel it now, this is actually going to help you with hunting and maybe fighting as well. You're gaining a lot of control. I can tell you're going to be a great warrior." Nettlepaw puffed out his chest in

pride.

"It's getting late, we might as well head back to camp and get some prey off the fresh-kill pile." Nettlepaw felt his belly rumble and realized he'd been getting hungry. "Alright." He replied.

Nettlepaw carried the moss he'd collected back to camp, for the first time feeling pride in what he was bringing back to his camp. *Applebreeze knows it. I'm going to be a great warrior!*

Chapter Five

"Time to wake up," Applebreeze's cheerful mew and gentle nudge woke Nettlepaw. He rolled back over, growling. "Moss gathering *again*?" He asked blearily.

"No, hare-brain." She teased. "Actually we're going to go hunting today. It'll be of good use for you." Nettlepaw rose to his paws. *I'm going hunting!* He thought, following his mentor out of the den.

To his dismay, Finchpaw, Thornpaw, and their mentors were standing out there as well. "They're coming too?" He hissed to his mentor.

Applebreeze cuffed his ear gently. "Of course they are, and don't look so disappointed about it. They're your Clanmates too."

Still not convinced, Nettlepaw approached them behind his mentor. Stonesong greeted them with a purr, but Thornpaw didn't look as happy to see Nettlepaw.

"*He*'s going?" Thornpaw snapped. "Can I go back to sleep? The kittypet will scare away all the prey!"

"You're the one who'll scare it off with your chattering." Nettlepaw retorted.

Applebreeze bristled. "When are you two going to actually start acting like Clanmates? Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into you two." Nettlepaw lashed his tail, but stayed quiet holding his glare with the brown apprentice. *He's the problem! He started it!* He thought stubbornly.

"Let's go instead of arguing. That won't fill any cat's belly." Stonesong reasoned. As he turned out of camp, Finchpaw cast an apologetic glance back at Nettlepaw. *At least she's not an arrogant fleabag.*

Cloverwing took the lead as Nettlepaw stepped over the edge of camp. It wasn't his first time seeing it, but the wind in his pelt and the sun in his eyes sparked the same feeling of joy as it had before.

"Let's hunt the high hilltop," the gray-and-white she-cat suggested. "No cat has hunted there in a few sunrises." Applebreeze and Stonesong nodded their approval. "Let's get on with it, then." Stonesong growled.

Grumpy old furball. Nettlepaw thought irritably. *He's Featherstar's littermate, he must be moving to the elder's den soon.*

As they neared the high moor, Applebreeze veered off in a slightly different path. "Nettlepaw and I will train for a short while by ourselves, then he can test his skills with the other apprentices. You all can hunt while you're waiting." When no cat argued, Applebreeze led Nettlepaw to a open stretch of land, with scraggly, tufty grass growing sparsely and heather tufts hiding the dusty earth below.

"To catch rabbits, which are our main source of prey, you'll need to master speed first. Show me how fast you can run to that heather patch over there." Nettlepaw thought it was a bit silly, but he began to sprint there as fast as he could.

He pushed his paws against the ground as fast as he could, and turned at the heather patch, running back as fast as he could to his mentor.

"Nicely done," she purred. "But you'll have to work on your technique. Your paws pound too hard, and if you're trying to sneak up on anything that won't work. Besides, it slows you down a bit. Try running on lighter paws."

Slightly frustrated, Nettlepaw turned and tried again. This time, instead of trying to push his paws down harder in an attempt to move faster, he tried to keep his pawsteps light and soft. When he was running back, he almost felt like he was gliding along with the wind. Breathless, he turned back to Applebreeze again. "That was better." She mewed.

Nettlepaw fought to catch his breath. Seeing his struggled his mentor's eyes gleamed with humor. "Don't worry, it'll get easier." She assured. "The more you run, the easier it'll be."

Applebreeze rose to her paws. "Now, catching a rabbit isn't just about speed. You don't have to be faster than it, just smarter."

"What do you mean?" Nettlepaw asked. Surely a cat would have to outrun a rabbit to catch it, or at least be able to keep up with it?

His mentor twitched her tail. "When you're chasing your prey, don't just try to run after it. Cut it off. Hunt with a partner, and drive it into the other's paws. Lead it away from its den. It's not about speed, it's about smarts." Applebreeze's whiskers twitched. "But of course, before you can do any of that you'll have to scent it."

Nettlepaw looked up at Applebreeze as she scented the air, jaws parted wide. "Smell that?" She inquired.

Nettlepaw tasted the air. He could smell the musty scent of heather, Thornpaw and Finchpaw and their mentors' scent drifting over the hill, and far away, the distant odor of the forest. But beneath that there was a meatier and heavier scent. "Yes, I think I do."

Applebreeze turned back toward the hillside. "Yes, that way. Time to see if you can catch your first rabbit," she purred, amusement in her eyes.

Following his mentor, Nettlepaw saw that she was crouched down, prepared to spring. The dark outline of a rabbit was silhouetted against the horizon. It was chewing on the tall grasses, oblivious to the cats stalking it.

Applebreeze sprang forward, bursting into a run. *She's so fast!* Nettlepaw thought in wonder. He took off after her, approaching the prey from its other side.

The rabbit let out a tiny squeal of terror and it too broke into a run, making Nettlepaw growl in frustration. His mentor's steady rhythm of paws pounding against the ground echoed into Nettlepaw's own racing pulse. *This is what being a warrior is!*

Seeing his prey gaining, Nettlepaw felt himself instinctively run faster. Finding himself pounding his paws even harder, he stopped to remember his training. Nettlepaw tried to place his paws lighter, and immediately found he was running lighter and faster. *I guess Applebreeze really does know what she's doing.*

Nettlepaw saw Applebreeze try to cut it off from the side, but faster than lightning the prey darted the other direction and disappeared down its hole. "Hare-dung!" His mentor cursed, slowing to a halt.

Thornpaw appeared at the edge of the hilltop, sneering. He held no prey, to Nettlepaw's satisfaction, and Finchpaw was carrying a scrawny lapwing.

"Missed your catch, kittypet?" Thornpaw sneered. "Too fast for you? Need to find something slower?"

"You don't have anything either." Nettlepaw growled. Applebreeze silenced him by resting her tail on his shoulders, but Cloverwing quickly changed the subject. "You should've seen Finchpaw! She caught that lapwing in one leap."

Finchpaw looked at her paws. "It's pretty thin," she mewed, embarrased. Stonesong flicked her ear with his tail reassuringly.

As Thornpaw sent Nettlepaw another glare, Applebreeze turned toward him. "We'll get the next one," she assured. Tasting the air, her eyes glinted. "Do you smell another one?" Nettlepaw asked.

"Yes, just over that rise." Applebreeze glanced at Nettlepaw. "I think you and Thornpaw should try to catch it. You two need to stop bickering like kits."

"But he'll ruin the catch!" Thornpaw protested. I'll *ruin it?* Nettlepaw thought angrily.

"Just go." Cloverwing sighed, looking tired. "But for StarClan's sake, don't argue. You'll scare it away."

As Nettlepaw reluctantly followed Thornpaw over the hill, he caught Finchpaw's eye. She nodded reassuringly, which made him perk up a bit. *Even if Thornpaw gets in the way, I'll still catch it!*

The brown tabby apprentice broke into a run, Nettlepaw on his tail. The rabbit saw them and it too began to spring across the hillside. *Oh no you don't!*

On light paws, Nettlepaw caught up with his denmate. As he was running, Nettlepaw was too focused on the rabbit to see Thornpaw cut him off abruptly.

"Hey!" He panted. "What was that for?" Thornpaw only rolled his eyes and continued the chase, and Nettlepaw had no choice but to race back to his position. *Stupid Thornpaw!*

The rabbit was gaining, and Thornpaw appeared to be getting tired fast. With a surge of determination, Nettlepaw pushed forward. *You're not getting away that easily!* He thought with a growl. The ground became a blur beneath him. *I'll get you!*

The rabbit took a sharp turn, and as Nettlepaw followed he saw that it was about to hop into its hole. As the prey disappeared, Nettlepaw didn't stop to think. He slipped in after it, feeling the earth close around him tightly. He could smell the rabbit's fear-scent thickly in the air.

"Nettlepaw!" Thornpaw called from outside of the tunnel. *But I'm just about to catch it!* However, the urgency in his denmate's mew caused him to stop in his tracks. *Can I even turn around in this tight a space?* Nettlepaw wondered, beginning to worry.

Then a noise like thunder sounded above his head and earth fell on Nettlepaw, smothering all his senses. *StarClan help me!*

Chapter Six

Nettlepaw was chasing a rabbit, running faster than he had ever run before. The ground flew by faster than usual, and he felt like he was floating. This rabbit stood no chance.

Just before he could leap forward and sink his claws into the rabbit's hide, Nettlepaw woke up.

He had a headache, and it seemed like every muscle hurt. Nettlepaw's ears were ringing with the sound of earth collapsing over top of him, and his mouth was dry with a faint taste of mud in it.

"Oh good, you're awake."

Sagefeather padded over to him. "How do you feel?" Nettlepaw realized he was in the medicine den, and laying on a nest of thick moss. He tried to lift his head, but it hurt too much so he lay back down instead. "Awful." He replied, his voice sounding thick and raspy.

The medicine cat twitched her tail. "You're lucky to be alive. No injuries, I assume?"

Nettlepaw shook his head. "I think I'm just bruised." He stretched, wincing as he did. "What happened? All I remember is being covered in dirt."

Sagefeather turned back, gathering a bundle of herbs. "Applebreeze says that you went into a rabbit tunnel after your prey." Her whiskers twitched in amusement, and Nettlepaw lashed his tail indignantly. "Thornpaw immediately ran to get her. She had to dig into the tunnel to pull you out. Thornpaw said it was very heroic of her."

Nettlepaw coughed softly. "And then? How long was I out?"

"Only overnight." Sagefeather replied. "Here, eat this." She instructed, pushing forward a small bundle of plants. Nettlepaw obliged, making a face at the bitter taste and finding it difficult to swallow.

"So I ran into a rabbit hole, the tunnel collapsed, and Applebreeze had to pull me out?" Nettlepaw asked, still trying to make sense of it all. He was feeling woozy from sleeping almost an entire day.

"Yes, pretty much." The medicine cat responded. As she pushed a soaking bundle of moss forward for Nettlepaw to drink, her apprentice Mudpaw came from the back of the den. "Oh hey, Nettlepaw. I heard what happened."

He was Windpaw's brother, only a few moons older than Nettlepaw, but his pelt was sleek and his shoulders broad. *He'd make a formidable fighter,* Nettlepaw mused. *But he seems to be doing great serving his Clan in this way.*

"Hey," Nettlepaw greeted before laying back down on his side. The herbs were working, but they seemed to make him even more tired than before. "W-what's happening?" He mumbled as he started to slip into unconsciousness.

Nettlepaw sensed Mudpaw stepping forward. "Is he alright?" He asked, worry in his voice.

"He's fine." Sagefeather assured. "It's the poppy seeds. I figured he could sleep through some more of it, and wake up feeling better."

Wake up better? Nettlepaw thought. *That sounds nice...*

* * *

Nettlepaw woke, already feeling a lot better. He was able to stretch in his nest, with only a little pain.

"Oh, good." Mudpaw mewed, relieved. "I was afraid Sagefeather gave you too many poppy seeds, but you're awake now. I guess she really does know what she's doing." Mentor and apprentice shared a fond glance.

Nettlepaw coughed, finding it less painful this time. "Then you should listen to me better," Sagefeather replied humorously before turning back to Nettlepaw. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better." He replied honestly. "Can I go out of the den for a bit? I'm *starving*."

Sagefeather held back a purr of laughter. "I suppose you may go," she mewed. As Nettlepaw was getting up out of his nest with a slight wince, she continued. "Don't put too much strain on yourself! No more training until I say so."

Nettlepaw half-nodded and padded out of the den, squinting in the sunlight after being in the dark den for so long. He stretched once more, tail lashing back and forth and relishing the fresh air in his face.

"Nettlepaw! You're awake!" Sedgefang cried, rushing over to her son's side and covering him with licks. "I was so worried when Applebreeze told me what happened."

"I'm fine." He muttered, trying to get away but his mother continued to lick him.

"Doesn't stop me being worried." Her gaze softened. "I'll never stop being worried for you." Nettlepaw looked at her skeptically. "Even when I'm a warrior, you'll have to be worried for me every time I'm out on patrol?"

"Yes." Sedgefang replied. Humor shone in her blue eyes. "You need to be more careful." She said mock-sternly.

"Of course, mother." Nettlepaw replied in the same tone. She purred and flicked his muzzle with her tail. "I'm proud of you," she mewed. "But I miss you in the nursery. I'll always miss you."

Without giving Nettlepaw a chance to reply, Sedgefang gave him a final lick on the shoulder and padded back to the warriors den. He almost felt bad, but changed his mind. *She'll see me even more when I'm a warrior and we share the same den!* He decided. *Besides, she said she was proud of me, so she can't be too unhappy.*

Nettlepaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile, stomach grumbling. He selected a large hare and began to eat it, when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Are you going to eat that all by yourself?"

Nettlepaw turned from his prey and saw Applebreeze. "Oh, hello!" He greeted. "I guess not, we can share." His mentor purred and sat beside him. "Are you feeling alright?" She asked.

"Much better. Sagefeather said that I should wait to train, but it's only a few bruises, maybe we can go out again? I promise I won't go diving in any more rabbit holes." Nettlepaw pleaded. *It's been so boring being cooped up in the medicine cat den, and what will I do once I finish eating?*

Applebreeze shook her head, whiskers twitching. "No, you should listen to your medicine cat." Nettlepaw looked at his paws. "Hopefully you'll be out again soon. On the other paw, I think going into the hole was brave, if a little hare-brained."

Nettlepaw took a bite of rabbit. "Really?"

Applebreeze nodded. "Yes. You really have the makings of a good hunter in you." Nettlepaw puffed out his chest. "If you can stay out of tunnel collapses, that is."

Nettlepaw flicked her with his tail. "I said I'd be careful! Besides, how was I supposed to know the tunnel wasn't safe?" He paused. "Sagefeather said you saved me. That's really brave of you."

His mentor looked away, embarrassed. "I didn't do much. Thornpaw came to me, looking pretty scared. I just went in and dug you out. Not a big deal." Nettlepaw took a closer look at Applebreeze. She looked tired, as if she had been missing sleep. Her hind leg had torn fur, and her ear had a spot of dried blood. *I think she's lying. What she did was pretty brave.*

Nettlepaw said nothing about it, however. "Thank you." He mewed. Applebreeze licked her chest fur, avoiding his gaze.

His mentor switched the subject. "How would you like to go to the

Gathering tonight? I think you deserve it."

Nettlepaw perked up. "Oh, can I?" He mewed. "I would love to go!" *My first Gathering!*

Applebreeze purred. "Of course you can. That is, if Sagefeather says you can, but I don't see why not." Nettlepaw felt like he was going to burst with joy. "Thank you!" He exclaimed, bounding off to Sagefeather's den. *I'll meet the other Clans! What are they like? Who are the other leaders? I'm so excited!*

"Don't overexcite yourself!" Applebreeze warned. "She might say no!" *Of course she won't!* Nettlepaw decided, turning into the medicine den.

Sagefeather turned from sorting herbs with Mudpaw. "Back so soon?" She purred.

"Hello." He panted. "Applebreeze asked me if I wanted to go to the gathering, but only if you say yes so can I?"

"Hey, slow down." Sagefeather mewed warmly. "Of course you can go, as long as you don't get too active." Beside her, Mudpaw's whiskers twitched.

"Thank you!" Nettlepaw replied excitedly, about to turn back out of the den when Sagefeather's voice stopped him. "Hold on a second, Nettlepaw. You should rest before the Gathering. It doesn't start until moonhigh."

"Rest?" Sleep seemed like the last think on his mind.

Sagefeather nodded. "Just lay down. I'm sure you'll fall asleep soon. They won't leave you behind."

Reluctantly, Nettlepaw lay down on his nest once more, closing his eyes and not expecting to be able to sleep. *Doesn't matter. I'll be going to the Gathering when I wake!*

Then he drifted into unconsciousness, dreaming of the Gathering to come.

Chapter Seven

"Nettlepaw, wake up!"

Nettlepaw sighed. "Dawn patrol already?" He mumbled, feeling too tired to be doing that this early.

"No, the Gathering." Applebreeze purred. "Now hurry or you'll be late!"

Nettlepaw rolled over. The sky was still dark, only a bright full moon sliced the darkness like a claw. "The Gathering!" He echoed, finally beginning to wake up and realize what his mentor had said.

"Of course, hare-brain. And if we don't get going we won't go at all! Come on, Finchpaw and Thornpaw are waiting outside already." Applebreeze mewed teasingly.

Nettlepaw nodded, trying to hide his disappointment. *I suppose it makes sense that they're going too, I just hope that Thornpaw doesn't ruin it for me.* He rose to his paws and followed Applebreeze into the clearing. *Finchpaw at least will be nice. Maybe we can meet the other apprentices together.* Nettlepaw felt his pelt prickle with apprehension.

A large group of warriors and a few elders crowded the camp. Nettlepaw could make out Thornpaw's and Finchpaw's pelts within, as well as a few of the other apprentices: Redpaw, Leopardpaw, Amberpaw, Goldenpaw, and Emberpaw. Their mentors were in the midst, as well as Nettlepaw's parents.

A bit overwhelmed, Nettlepaw stuck close to Applebreeze as Featherstar leaped onto the Clantree to adress the camp. The roar of voices quieted as the silver she-cat spoke. "I know this is the first time we have encountered AutumnClan in a moon, and we will be sharing our suspicions of stolen prey." Approving murmurs spread around the cats. "However, I do not want any cat directly accusing an AutumnClan warrior. Gatherings are for peace, and we will not

be the Clan to break the truce."

As Featherstar began to lead the cats out of camp, Applebreeze turned to Nettlepaw. "That means you as well," she whispered. "No picking fights."

Shoving back frustration, Nettlepaw nodded. "Okay." He followed her and his Clan, exiting camp and beginning to cross the moor. "What should I expect?"

"There will be many cats there. All the Clans and their leaders, and most of their warriors. It will be overwhelming at first, but if you find a few apprentices to hang out with you'll feel better. This is a good time to make new friends, but remember in a battle your loyalty should lie with your Clan." Applebreeze explained. "Don't worry, you'll do fine."

"I can't wait. Are the other Clans the same as us? What if the apprentices don't like me?" He worried.

Applebreeze purred. "They're a bit different, but not much. As for the apprentices, you'll have to wait and find out." She nudged him. "Like I said. Don't worry, it'll be fun."

Unconvinced, Nettlepaw let his mind wander as they neared the Gathering hollow. *I hope the other Clans are nice. Will AutumnClan be angry when we accuse them?*

Soon they reached the border, where the vast Spring River flowed completely around the island, and branched off to make the borders of SpringClan. Off where Nettlepaw couldn't see, the mountains where it was sourced were, and so was the entrance to the starcave. Medicine cats went there every half-moon to visit with StarClan, and one day Nettlepaw would too, as every apprentice usually went there at least once.

"Ready?" Applebreeze asked. Nettlepaw nodded nervously. He saw Featherstar begin to walk across a fallen tree, followed by Liontooth then the rest of her warriors. *We're going to have to cross that?*

When it came Nettlepaw's turn to cross, he glanced uncertainly at

Applebreeze. "I know. I was nervous my first time too. Just dig your claws in deep and you'll be alright." She assured. It was hard to picture his mentor as an apprentice, but he was able to place an unsteady paw on the bark.

Digging in his claws, he put down his other forepaw, and soon he was all the way on the trunk. He found it a bit easier than tree-climbing, but used his father's technique of only lifting one paw at a time and soon made it to the other side. "You did great." Applebreeze whispered in his ear.

Nettlepaw leaped off the trunk and took a glance around Tall Trees. He was indeed overwhelmed, many cats' scent mingled through the hollow and voices turned into a dull roar. He saw his Clanmates spread apart to speak with old friends, and show off their new skills. Featherstar leaped onto the great sycamore branch that hovered over the island like a shadow. Two other leaders were already up there: a tortoiseshell she-cat who smelled of fish and marshes, and an intimidating red-and white tom.

There are two Clans here already, so which is missing? By the fishy scent wafting off of one side, he assumed SpringClan had arrived. And AutumnClan smelled strongly of tree sap and rotting leaves. He knew that from being by their border. As Nettlepaw tasted the air, he detected no smells like that, so that meant WinterClan was the one led by the large tom on the branch.

They smelled like cold stone and sparse grass. Nettlepaw wrinkled his nose, suddenly confused. *There are too many scents here to try and figure out each one,* he decided.

He turned and saw his mentor conversing with two SpringClan cats, while who seemed like their apprentices sat rather bored beside them. Nettlepaw swallowed back nervousness and walked over to say hello.

"Hey, I'm Nettlepaw. Who are you?" The first apprentice, a clearly marked silver tabby's blue eyes shone with surprise, and he greeted Nettlepaw shyly. "I'm Br-er, Blizzardpaw from SpringClan, and this is my brother Breezepaw." The other tabby awkwardly dipped his head in greeting.

Nettlepaw couldn't help but notice Blizzardpaw had a twisted front paw, and was keeping weight off of it. The apprentice was just as big as Nettlepaw. "When were you made an apprentice? I've been one for about a moon." He mewed, trying to avoid looking at his paw.

Breezepaw met his gaze. "Tonight, actually."

"Really?" Nettlepaw couldn't help but ask. "We're about the same age!"

Blizzardpaw nodded, showing his twisted paw. "We were apprenticed late because of this accident. Got in a fight with a fox." He puffed out his chest.

The apprentice was making light talk of it, but clearly the accident had impacted his life more than he wanted to admit. His brother beside him had a clean scar across his shoulder, and both still showed signs from the attack. *Poor apprentices,* Nettlepaw thought sympathetically. *They can't be proper warriors, surely?*

"That sounds awful." Nettlepaw replied. Changing the subject, he continued. "Who are those over there?" A grumpy-looking white she-cat was sitting by herself, and two more apprentices chatted with a few WinterClan cats.

"Over there?" Breezepaw asked. "That's Dewpaw and Riverpaw. They're older than us." The silver tabby paused. "That's Whitepaw." He mewed, looking at the sour apprentice.

"What's up with her?" Nettlepaw whispered. Blizzardpaw avoided his gaze, while Breezepaw continued to explain. "She... she's still mad about the attack. Her brother was killed."

Nettlepaw looked at his paws, shocked. *That must have been one dangerous fox.*

Blizzardpaw spoke up. "She's only mad because the accident was my fault." He hung his head, while his brother tried to comfort him. "Don't say that. We were all stupid kits, and they didn't exactly stop it from happening."

Clearly this story went more in-depth than Nettlepaw was aware of. He took a step away from the apprentices. *I hope they find a way to feel better about what happened.*

Nettlepaw didn't have more time to think, because AutumnClan had entered the clearing. A white tom joined the leaders on the branch, and the cats quieted. The Gathering was beginning.

"I'll start." The red-and-white leader of WinterClan spoke in a gruff voice. "WinterClan is thriving. We are sad to say our deputy Tigerstripe joined the elder's den not long ago, but Shadeheart has replaced him." Nettlepaw could see a dark gray tom puffing out his chest in WinterClan's crowd as a few cats shouted his name in respect. "We also have two new apprentices, Cedarpaw and Brownpaw."

"We are pleased to hear that, Kestrelstar." The tortoiseshell spoke warmly. "Thank you, Meadowstar." He replied to SpringClan's leader.

"Shadeheart! Cedarpaw! Brownpaw!" The cats chanted, and Nettlepaw lifted his head to the stars to yowl their names.

"SpringClan too is doing well." Meadowstar declared. "We're well fed and stronger than ever, and are pleased to report we have three new warriors: Leafheart, Stemtail, and Woodclaw. SpringClan also made two kits apprentices tonight, Blizzardpaw and Breezepaw." Nettlepaw shared a warm glance with his new friends as the Clans cheered their names.

"I'll go next, if you don't mind." AutumnClan's white leader hissed. Featherstar bristled, but didn't argue. "Very well, Echostar."

Echostar called the cats' attention. "AutumnClan is as strong as ever. We have three new warriors: Goosewhisker, Birchstorm, and Mosstail. We are willing to defend our borders with our strength if necessary." The hostility in AutumnClan's leader's mew surprised Nettlepaw. *They're the ones who are stealing prey!*

Featherstar returned his glare. "SummerClan too is well-fed. We have two warriors, Nightsong and Badgerfoot, and three

apprentices: Thornpaw, Finchpaw, and Nettlepaw." Nettlepaw turned, surprised, and licked his chest fur embarrassedly as they cheered his name. "Not only that, but we have found some strange evidence by our border with AutumnClan."

That's it. Nettlepaw realized. *How will they react?*

"Oh really?" Echostar mewed silkily. "What sort of evidence?" The leaders on the branch shifted uncomfortably. Which side would they take?

"Evidence that your warriors were taking prey!" Featherstar snapped. "Is it true, Echostar? Is AutumnClan desperate enough to steal from SummerClan?"

Chapter Eight

Echostar bristled at Featherstar's stinging retort. "AutumnClan is not desperate." He hissed. "And we have not been taking your prey. Maybe your warriors have scented wrong."

Featherstar lashed her tail back and forth as Nettlepaw watched in awe. "Are you accusing SummerClan of lying?" The white leader only scowled in response. "We know what we scented."

Meadowstar stepped in between the arguing leaders. "Now, don't get your tails in a twist." She chastised. "Echostar, are you sure *none* of your warriors crossed the border? Possibly even on accident?"

Echostar snarled. "Of course not. We wouldn't steal prey."

"Try telling that to my cats who clearly scented your Clan doing just that." Featherstar snapped. "If AutumnClan does it again, SummerClan is prepared to retaliate." No other cat replied, but Echostar refused to stay silent. "I'm telling you, you won't have to worry about that." His face twisted into a look of defiance.

Featherstar's tail lashed back and forth. Meadowstar stepped between them, and they spoke in hushed voices for a few moments. No other cat could hear, though Nettlepaw strained his ears to try.

"AutumnClan will be leaving now." Echostar announced.

Featherstar leaped off the branch. "So will SummerClan. Know we are strong and prepared to defend our prey." She began to walk out of the clearing, leading her Clan to go with her.

Nettlepaw cast an apologetic glance at Blizzardpaw and Breezepaw, who had been listening with wide eyes to the leaders' fight. Nettlepaw mouthed a quick goodbye, then followed his Clan across the river and away from the Gathering island. *Will we get into a war with AutumnClan?* Nettlepaw wondered, glancing at Featherstar who was silently padding on, still looking angry.

Finchpaw padded over to Nettlepaw's side. "That was crazy." She mewed, eyes wide.

"Yeah." Nettlepaw mewed absentmindedly. "I wonder if AutumnClan really didn't hunt on our territory."

Finchpaw cast a surprised look at him. "Really? Of course they hunted on our territory! Multiple warriors scented AutumnClan."

Nettlepaw sighed. "I still don't know. There's something weird going on with this whole situation." Finchpaw was quiet, padding on in silence.

"I don't trust Echostar." She mewed at last. "He seemed a bit *too* defensive, almost as if he thought we were the ones crossing the border." Nettlepaw only nodded, but on the inside he really agreed with her. *There's something up with him, and I think there's something up with this whole thing.*

Liontooth, however, along with a few other senior warriors definitely thought otherwise. Nettlepaw and Finchpaw quickly crossed the log and walked on while Nettlepaw listened to their conversation.

"AutumnClan!" Liontooth spat out the name as if it tasted like crow-food. "The liars! How dare they steal prey, then act as if they never did anything wrong!" Nettlepaw thought the tom was being more arrogant than usual, but Finchpaw didn't seem to notice. He continued to listen intently.

Birchclaw nodded in agreement. "I smelled their scent with my own nose! Echostar doesn't know what he's saying, the mad fleabag!" Nettlepaw tried not to bristle. *How dare they speak of a Clan leader like that?*

Liontooth and a few others yowled in agreement, and the wild debate continued on the return journey. Finchpaw seemed quiet, having clearly heard her father's claims, and it was a while before she looked up at Nettlepaw, her wide yellow gaze unreadable.

"I'm sorry about him." She began softly. "He's a bit arrogant

sometimes, but there are reasons to care about him."

"Don't apologize." Nettlepaw had always heard awful things about the deputy, coming from his mother who had always seemed to hold a grudge against him for some reason. But looking at Finchpaw now, it was easy to see how much she did care about her father. *I guess any cat can be better around those they love.*

Finchpaw blinked gratefully at him, then she resumed her talk about AutumnClan. "I know Liontooth may be wrong, but Echostar and his stuck-up clanmates need to be taught a lesson!" She declared. "They should know to stay off our territory!"

Nettlepaw didn't reply as the warriors climbed down the slope to their camp. Featherstar, still angry from the argument, stalked right to her den and no cat followed her. Finchpaw flicked Nettlepaw's shoulder with her tail and went to Thornpaw, who was showing off to the other apprentices. Nettlepaw was left not knowing where to go when an excited squeal caught his attention.

"Nettlepaw! Nettlepaw!" It was Hailkit, leading his brothers Cloudkit and Creekkit out of the nursery and barreling onto Nettlepaw. He pretended to be overpowered, and staggered on his paws. "Oh no!" He cried dramatically. "The fierce warriors are attacking me!" On the inside, he felt pleased. *It's been a while since I was their size!*

Creekkit placed a paw on his throat. "I've got you now!" He declared, but his brother Hailkit shoved him away first, and they tussled on the ground.

Nettlepaw had noticed the three's personalities developing, and noticed how Cloudkit was often quieter than the others. Creekkit and Hailkit were louder and play-fought more, but all three were energetic and as excited to become apprentices as any kit.

"How was the Gathering? Tell us!" Hailkit demanded gleefully. Creekkit agreed. "Yeah, Mistdapple wouldn't let us go!"

Nettlepaw lifted Creekkit and placed him on the ground gently. "It was fine." He said vaguely, not wanting to be the one to tell the kits

about AutumnClan.

"What are the other Clans like?" Cloudkit inquired, blue eyes wide with curiosity.

"I met two SpringClan apprentices." Nettlepaw told them. "They were lighter-colored than us, and smelled of marshes and fish, but other than that they were just like us."

Creekkit let out a playful growl. "Hailkit's a stinky SpringClan warrior! Get him!" Cloudkit let out and excited squeal and joined in the fight. Hailkit growled fake menacingly and let his fur stand on end. "Oh yeah? Well I'm the biggest, meanest, stinkiest SpringClan warrior in the Clan!" The three kits began to tussle across the earth, kicking up dust.

"Are you three bothering Nettlepaw?" Mistdapple asked, poking her head out of the nursery to check on her kits.

Nettlepaw shook his head as the kits let out a chorus of 'no'. The queen sighed and picked up Creekkit by the scruff, gesturing for the other two to come with her. "Come on, time to go to bed. It's getting late."

The moon was indeed at its fullest, Nettlepaw saw as the kits reluctantly followed their mother into their nest. *I'd better get to sleep too, or else I'll be too tired to train tomorrow!*

He padded to the apprentice's den, laying down in his nest. Moments later, he fell asleep.

* * *

Tall and imposing trees towered above Nettlepaw's head. The earth was wet and unpleasant beneath his paws, and misty shadow hung over the marshland stretching endlessly around him.

Fear pulsed through his paws, and he took a hesitant step forward. "Who's there?" He asked, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice as he felt a prickle in his pelt as if a cat was watching him from afar.

"You may think you're safe now, but wait! The cats who you trust will betray you!" A screech sounded from an unseen place.

"Who are you? Where are you?" Nettlepaw yowled. "What do you want?"

The only response was an ear splitting bought of laughter. "You can pretend you weren't warned, but I'm telling you now! You can't escape your destiny!"

Nettlepaw frantically searched for the cat the calls were coming from, but all he could see was darkness and trees in every direction. "What destiny?" Nettlepaw asked.

"I know what you will do, Nettlepaw! You can't escape it!" The voice screeched, sending cold terror down Nettlepaw's spine.

What will I do? What does that cat want?

* * *

Nettlepaw woke up, the scent of the strange forest still lingering in his nose. Mud still clumped in the fur between his toes, and it wasn't the only thing that had stayed. The constant fear of the shadowy marsh still made his fur tingle with apprehension.

Chapter Nine

Nettlepaw took the rear position of the patrol. He was glad to have been chosen for the border patrol to check on AutumnClan's activity, but also nervous. He was the youngest apprentice there.

Applebreeze led it, with her sister Mapleblaze at her side and Dovewillow shortly behind them. Amberpaw trailed at her mentor's side. Nettlepaw didn't know her too well but he had seen her with her siblings and she was a great fighter. He had noticed that her pelt had grown sleeker, her muscles more noticeable underneath, and she looked more like a grown cat. Her siblings looked that way too, and as the oldest apprentices Nettlepaw could only assume they'd be warriors soon.

Nettlepaw had to fluff out his pelt to the leaf-fall wind. Even though in the hills the sun still shone on every cat's back, the trees in this part of their territory made it shaded and cold.

Suddenly the apprentice's ears perked. Nettlepaw watched with interest as Amberpaw crouched down, then broke into a run. She tore after a russet-colored squirrel that had been digging through the undergrowth. *I suppose I could've been scenting for prey as well,* Nettlepaw thought guiltily, only now noticing the squirrel's scent. *We can still hunt on border patrols.*

Amberpaw dashed out of sight, and the patrol followed her, finding it slightly difficult to navigate the forest without tripping over roots. *How is she doing this?* AutumnClan's border was near, which meant everything grew thicker and closer together. It was a headache.

Nettlepaw suddenly heard a commotion ahead. Hissing and sounds of cats approaching alerted them, and he was surprised at what he saw when Amberpaw came in sight.

Four AutumnClan warriors stood at the border. From the scent, Nettlepaw could tell they had crossed it. One of them had her paw on the very squirrel Amberpaw had been chasing, and the

apprentice let out an indignant wail. "That was my squirrel!"

The she-cat who had caught the prey yowled in laughter. "It *was* yours, but it's ours now!" She jeered. "It crossed the border, puny apprentice! Didn't you notice? Or are *all* SummerClan warriors unable to scent it?" The cats behind her chorused in laughter.

Amberpaw hissed and began to lunge at the warrior, but Dovewillow stepped behind her and grabbed her by the scruff. "What is going on here?" She mewed sternly, casting a hostile glance at the young warriors while her apprentice half sulked, half glared at her side.

A tom next to the she-cat sent a returning glare her way. "Don't even start complaining about crossing the border! We could say the same about SummerClan!"

Nettlepaw yowled in rage. "What do you mean! We've clearly scented AutumnClan on our side of the border!"

The she-cat whipped around to face him, while Applebreeze rested her tail on his shoulder as a warning to be quiet. "What are you talking about, apprentice? This is the first patrol we've sent on your land!" She sneered. "We figured we'd return the favor." The AutumnClan she-cat snapped.

A snarl was heard behind Nettlepaw. "Liars!" Amberpaw growled, launching herself over the border and at the she-cat. Dovewillow hissed in frustration and tried again to restrain her apprentice but the ginger she-cat had already landed on the she-cat and clawed at her pelt.

A moment later, the whole patrol was across the border and began to fight. AutumnClan had a few less cats than SummerClan did on theirs, but they fought with the strength of many more.

Nettlepaw found himself fighting a large gray tom. He struggled, having not had any battle training yet.

"Rat-pelt!" The warrior spat. "Your warriors have no right trespassing on our land and blaming us!"

Nettlepaw took a hard blow to the side and fell over. "We never did such a thing!"

The gray tom sneered. "You're a lying fleabag, just like all the rest of your Clan!"

Nettlepaw was filled with unexpected fury. He launched himself upward and latched his jaws on the tom's shoulder. Yowling in pain, he writhed, shaking off Nettlepaw who fell heavily to the ground.

He was rescued by Applebreeze who bowled into the tom, giving him a few scratches to remember her by before driving him off with a nip in the hind leg.

"You okay?" She asked, panting for breath. Nettlepaw nodded, standing on shaky paws.

The small battle had cleared up, and most of AutumnClan had fled. The she-cat who had caught the squirrel, which was now laying tattered on the ground, was the only one remaining. She snarled, but quickly realized she was hopelessly outnumbered.

"You may have won, but AutumnClan will never give in!" She yowled before turning tail and fleeing into her territory.

* * *

Nettlepaw padded into camp after his patrol. He felt lucky, he only had a small scrape across his side from landing so heavily, and a few bruises, but Applebreeze was worse than him, having a torn claw and a scratch on her nose and shoulder. Dovewillow and Mapleblaze were beaten up as well. Strangely, Amberpaw who had been fighting the longest out of them was left virtually scotch-free.

The SummerClan cats immediately noticed something was off when they entered camp. It was well past sunhigh by then and most cats were back to camp.

"Dovewillow?" Featherstar, who was sharing prey with her littermates Stonesong and Birchclaw inquired. "Did something happened with AutumnClan?"

Mapleblaze answered for her. "Yes, something happened! While we were at the border they attacked us!"

While the Clan's eyes widened, Dovewillow corrected her Clanmates. "No, Amberpaw here," she cast a look at her apprentice, "attacked *them.* But the thing was, they had sent a patrol past our border and caught the prey she was chasing. They claimed they had never crossed our border, and *we* were the only ones that had."

"And then Amberpaw attacked them." Applebreeze finished. "And battle broke out. We had the numbers and drove them away, but I'm afraid they're planning something bigger."

Nettlepaw nodded. "Yeah, the she-cat said something strange when she left- 'you may have won, but AutumnClan will never give in' I think."

Featherstar was unsettled. "Then we must make a move. I was afraid it would get to this point, but it seems I have no choice. They must be stopped. In two sunrises, we will attack."

The Clan let out battle-cry yowls. Nettlepaw felt himself joining in, almost subconsciously. *AutumnClan must be stopped!*

"And I want Amberpaw, Redpaw, and Emberpaw to be there with us-as warriors!"

The three apprentices padded forward, eyes glinting with disbelief. Featherstar nodded, eyes warm.

"I, Featherstar, leader of SummerClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn."

She continued. "Amberpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Her paws were trembling, but the ginger she-cat didn't have an ounce of doubt in her mew as she spoke. "I do."

Featherstar purred softly. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Amberpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Amberheart. StarClan honors your bravery and intelligence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SummerClan."

She repeated the ceremony for Emberpaw and Redpaw, naming them Emberblaze and Redstripe. The Clan chanted the new warriors' names gleefully.

One day that will be me up there.

Nettlepaw caught Liontooth's eye. The pale warrior was stone-faced, neither disappointed or yowling with relief. *Strange,* Nettlepaw thought. *He was pushing so hard for us to attack last time they crossed the border!*

Suddenly the tom turned tail and left camp. Nettlepaw almost followed him out, but his mentor stopped him.

"Nettlepaw, you should get that scrape checked out," she said, worry in her mew. Nettlepaw realized it was starting to bleed, but still nothing serious. "Only if you come with me," he replied, noticing her own injuries.

"Fine." Her eyes glinted with appreciation.

As Sagefeather and Mudpaw treated their wounds, Nettlepaw had time to think to himself.

What is Liontooth planning? I wish I'd been able to find out.

Is he unhappy about attacking for a reason? Does he have kin in AutumnClan or something?

Nettlepaw stifled a gasp. *Is he going to warn them?*

But he had no choice but to stay where he was while his medicine cat tended to his wounds, the threat of the oncoming battle looming over his head.

Chapter Ten

Finchpaw woke Nettlepaw up that morning. He had fallen asleep in the medicine cat den, but Applebreeze was nowhere to be found.

"Come on, lazy." She purred. "We have to go train."

"All three of us?" Nettlepaw asked groggily.

"Yes, Thornpaw is coming too." Finchpaw said with a sigh. "You two are my closest friends. I wish you could get along better."

I would get along with him if he stopped teasing me, Nettlepaw thought. *But closest friends with Finchpaw?* For some reason that made him really happy.

He followed the older apprentice out of camp and to the Blazing Maple. The leaf-fall chill had caused most of the moss there to dry up, but it was still a great place to train. If you like having countless obstacles in the way, that is.

Nettlepaw awkwardly stepped over a root wad and into the space where Cloverwing, Stonesong and Applebreeze were waiting as well as Thornpaw.

"We will work on battle training today." Stonesong announced. He always seemed to take control of the training, which made sense as he was a senior warrior, but sometimes it was annoying.

"I understand Nettlepaw hasn't had much experience with this, so he will work alone with Applebreeze before joining us. Then you will split up in pairs to train. Remember, always keep your claws sheathed during training."

Applebreeze and Nettlepaw split off and began to work on some basic moves.

"The first thing you need to know is your vulnerable areas. Your belly and neck, mostly. If you give your opponent access to those

areas the battle will quickly change course." His mentor instructed him.

Nettlepaw nodded, remembering how the gray tom had tried to force him on his back during the border fight where both areas would be exposed.

"I want you to try to attack me without letting me at your belly or neck," Applebreeze said. "Now."

Nettlepaw hesitantly took a step forward. "Go on," Applebreeze encouraged.

He lunged, hooking his paws on Applebreeze's shoulders. She took a swipe at his belly, but he clambered onto her back and dodged quickly. As he was reaching to paw at her neck, she fell on her back, knocking the wind out of Nettlepaw. Gasping for breath, she placed a paw on his neck.

"I liked your approach," she said, eyes glinting. "But you need to think through what could happen. When you landed on my back, you didn't think of how I could have done that, did you?" Nettlepaw shook his head.

"Try again." Applebreeze mewed.

This time Nettlepaw immediately went for her belly. As she was defending, he slipped away and grasped her shoulders. He used his weight to push her to the ground, exposing her belly and neck. But she kicked out her hind legs, landing the blow on his belly and sending him flying backward.

"That was better, but you have to be careful doing that because though you exposed my belly, you also exposed yours." Applebreeze commented, panting for breath. "Now I want you to defend while I attack."

This went on for a while until Nettlepaw had learned a considerable amount. He felt like he could have gone back to sleep but Applebreeze had other plans.

Applebreeze smoothed out her fur. "Now we'll train with Thornpaw

and Finchpaw. I want you to have practice fighting cats who are also young and quick."

"Wait, before we go." Nettlepaw began. "I have a question for you."

Applebreeze tilted her head. "Okay, ask away."

"Does Liontooth have kin or friends in AutumnClan that you know of?" He asked. *Maybe there is a cat he would have gone to warn, if that was really what he was doing last night.*

His mentor looked confused. "Not that I know of." She replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason." So where was the deputy going?

Applebreeze gave him another questioning look before leading Nettlepaw over to the other apprentices who were fighting by the Blazing Maple's roots. Thornpaw overpowered Finchpaw, but she thrust out her hind legs, sending him flying backward. She leaped on him and they tussled like play-fighting kits.

"Okay, you two." Cloverwing said warmly. "Time to go against Nettlepaw and see how you do."

Stonesong nodded. "Finchpaw, why don't you fight Nettlepaw? I think Thornpaw needs practice with multiple opponents, and Cloverwing and I can fight him while Applebreeze watches you two," he suggested.

Finchpaw nodded, eyes narrowing as she sized up Nettlepaw. *I should probably do that too,* he realized.

Finchpaw was scrawnier than Nettlepaw, but he could see her strength under her thin pelt. Her claws and mind were sharp, but he could probably knock her off balance with a blow to the shoulder.

"Ready?" She asked, claws unsheathing then sheathing again. Nettlepaw nodded, and she lunged.

He wasn't expecting the brute strength behind her blows or how quickly she'd overpower him. Nettlepaw was thrown off guard and

she pushed him to the ground, but before she could strike his underbelly he twisted and bit her paw, causing her to yelp.

Feeling slightly guilty but pushing it back, Nettlepaw sent a blow to her shoulder and tried to shove her down, but she lashed out with a paw to his neck which he had forgotten about defending.

"Hare dung!" Nettlepaw cursed as they both rested on their hind paws, panting. Finchpaw let out light laugh. "I didn't think it would be *that* easy to beat you."

Nettlepaw rose to his paws, fake-snarling. "Oh yeah? I'll show you easy!"

He leaped forward, grasping her shoulders and using his weight to push her to the ground. He struck quickly, pawing at her underbelly, and leapt away hastily remembering Applebreeze's warning.

"No fair, I wasn't ready!" Finchpaw complained. She darted forward and began to leap, but before she left the ground she changed course. Nettlepaw, who had been prepared to defend himself from her leaping approach was caught off guard and overpowered. But when she pinned him down she forgot about defending herself, and Nettlepaw pushed her off him with his hind legs.

"Finchpaw, being beaten by a kittypet?" Thornpaw taunted, clambering over a root to meet the two. "I thought you were better than that."

Finchpaw's tail twitched and she bristled. "Lay off, Thornpaw." He looked genuinely surprised, as if he really thought she'd think he was funny.

"Why are you defending him?" He sneered. "Is he your best friend now? What about me?"

"Okay, let's calm down." Applebreeze stepped in before Finchpaw could reply. "Nettlepaw, I want you to fight Thornpaw." There was a gleam in her eyes, and Nettlepaw padded over to her to talk to her.

"Why should I fight him? He's only going to cheat!" He snapped.

Applebreeze only smiled.

"I'll be watching. I don't think he's going to try anything. Besides, you fight well when you're angry."

She's right, Nettlepaw realized. He thought about how he had taken down Finchpaw when she taunted him, and how he had overpowered the gray tom at the border fight after his insults.

"Okay, but I'm not going to like it." Nettlepaw said grumpily. When he turned back around, Thornpaw was ready with a sneer on his face.

Sizing him up like Finchpaw, Nettlepaw realized he wasn't as quick or smart as his sister. He was sturdy and strong, but not very lithe. Nettlepaw narrowed his eyes, suddenly feeling better about the fight.

He made the first move, darting forward to strike his shoulder before retreating back again. Thornpaw leaped at Nettlepaw, but he dodged and rolled out of the way.

While Nettlepaw was lying on his back, Thornpaw took the opportunity to pin him down and lash at his neck. Nettlepaw rolled out of the way just in time, but the blow still landed on his shoulder painfully.

Nettlepaw threw Thornpaw off of him, tussling and rolling down a slope. They hit a root and Nettlepaw landed on his paws, but Thornpaw tripped when he landed and Nettlepaw used it to his advantage.

Nettlepaw placed a paw on Thornpaw's neck. "Got you." He said, but the apprentice looked back up at him with a malicious glare.

Nettlepaw felt a cold pain in his shoulder and realized Thornpaw had clawed him. "Hey, no claws-"

Thornpaw gripped his shoulders with his claws painfully, shoving him to the ground. Rage filled Nettlepaw and he slashed at Thornpaw's face, while the golden apprentice lashed at his ear.

Nettlepaw barely felt the pain but he did feel teeth in his scruff jerking him away before he could strike back. He locked eyes with Thornpaw, and the tom glared back ferociously.

Applebreeze let go of his scruff. "Nettlepaw!" She snapped. "Why would you use claws after I told you not to!"

"He did it first," Nettlepaw mumbled, instantly feeling guilty. *I shouldn't have followed his pawsteps. I'm just as bad as he is.*

"I don't care whose fault it was! You're taking care of the elders for a moon, and hopefully you can think about this while you're busy with that."

Nettlepaw took a step back, ears flattened. He had never seen Applebreeze truly angry before, except for the battle when she had fought off the gray tom.

"We're going back to camp." Applebreeze said gruffly, beginning to pad off. Nettlepaw followed her lead, numb to the blood dripping from his torn ear onto his face.

As Nettlepaw was limping back to camp, he caught Thornpaw's glare. He returned it with one of his own, realizing he wasn't just a rival. Thornpaw was his enemy, and Nettlepaw wasn't sure he could ever be friends with that cat, no matter how much Finchpaw wanted him to be.

Chaper Eleven

Nettlepaw padded into camp with a wad of moss filling his mouth and almost completely covering his face. *This is humiliating,* he thought grumpily.

He walked into the elder's den, laying down the moss. Wolfpelt and Flowerstream were asleep, but Brightpetal was wide awake and greeted him warmly.

"Such a great apprentice. Thank you for the bedding, Nettlepaw."

He nodded his head, smiling at his kin. The white she-cat helped him arrange nests for herself and her sleeping denmates. "See you soon!"

Silently thanking Applebreeze for teaching him how to gather moss, he padded out into camp. The sun was setting. Had he been out all day gathering moss and prey and bringing it back to the elders as his punishment? *It feels good to do work for my Clan, but I just want to sleep now!*

Nettlepaw expected to fall asleep the moment he curled up in his nest, but he lay there awake for a while before realizing he wasn't getting anywhere. But to his surprise, when he opened his eyes he was in the same gloomy marsh he had seen in his dreams a few sunrises ago.

"There you are, Nettlepaw." A shadow of a cat approached him. "I've been trying to get to you, but you've been so busy! What a good little warrior, helping your Clan."

"Who are you?" Nettlepaw spat. "Stop speaking nonsense!"

The she-cat purred. "I would like to tell you, but I have more important news to get right now. They're here, Nettlepaw. They want revenge."

"Who? Who wants revenge?" Nettlepaw asked, then cursed himself. *Don't listen to her! She's just trying to get in your head.*

"Don't lie to yourself, Nettlepaw. You know who I'm talking about. And you should probably wake up; wouldn't want to miss such an important turning point of your path, would you?" She said with a laugh. Nettlepaw was about to fire more questions when he woke abruptly.

At first, nothing seemed wrong. The camp was sleeping peacefully, the crickets hummed above and the rustle of the grass on the hillside floated in the air like an eerie melody. But the rustling grew louder until he was sure it wasn't just from the wind in the grass. Nettlepaw rose to his paws, squinting to look over the edge of the camp wall.

Then the grass exploded.

Gleaming claws and eyes burst into the camp, and Nettlepaw recognized their scent with a start. The cat on watch, Echofrost, let out a yowl of alarm echoing Nettlepaw's thoughts.

"AutumnClan! AutumnClan's attacking!"

The cats around Nettlepaw stirred. He saw a few cats stir in the warrior's den, and around him Leopardpaw and Goldenpaw were wide awake, Windpaw was now rising to her paws as well, and Thornpaw and Finchpaw had both awakened.

"SummerClan! Attack!" Liontooth's yowl startled Nettlepaw, but as the apprentices around him began to race out the den he saw a tortoiseshell figure attack Echofrost. *This really is a battle,* Nettlepaw realized. *They've ambushed our camp.*

Anger flooded through him. *First they steal our prey; now they're attacking us when we're defenseless?*

Featherstar leapt into battle alongside her deputy, and most of the warriors had joined her. Leopardpaw turned around to face his denmates.

"Well?" He spat. "What are we waiting for? Let's drive those filthy

AutumnClan flea-pelts out of our camp!"

Suddenly filled with energy, Nettlepaw leaped into battle. He felt his Clanmates at his side, and was filled with confidence. *AutumnClan doesn't stand a chance!*

He noticed a light gray AutumnClan apprentice about his age who met him in battle. She was fierce and quick, and immediately went for his throat.

Nettlepaw dodged the blow but it landed on his shoulder, drawing blood. He grimaced as pain shot through the new wound, but got back on his paws quickly.

He noticed a scar on her leg. *Maybe it's weak enough if I go for it then she will fall,* he thought.

Darting forward, he bit hard onto the apprentice's hind leg. She let out a yowl and tried to fight back, but lost balance and tripped.

Nettlepaw took advantage of her fall and leapt on her back, and they tussled across the camp. They both landed heavily and Nettlepaw found himself being pinned down by the apprentice.

But she'd forgotten how doing that would also expose her belly. Nettlepaw kicked out his hind paws, claws unsheathed. She tumbled backwards with a hiss of pain, then turned tail and ran out of camp, leaving a trail of blood.

Nettlepaw stood taller in triumph, hardly noticing the blood dripping from his shoulder wound. *I defeated her!*

But a warrior bowled him over from the side. He found himself locked in battle once more, and fought to see who his opponent was.

The gray tom from the border fight looked him in the eye. "You!" Nettlepaw snarled.

"Me." The tom said with a sneer. He shoved Nettlepaw to the ground with his weight, holding him there with his claws digging in. Nettlepaw winced as the tom thrust a blow to his face,

reopening the torn ear that had only just started to heal up.

Nettlepaw twisted underneath the tom and snapped at his paw, causing him to hiss. He slipped free while he was distracted, leaping onto his back and clawing at his shoulders and head.

The tom hissed, and Nettlepaw took Applebreeze's advice and predicted what he would do. When the tom rolled to his back to try and crush him, Nettlepaw leaped out of the way and went for his belly, but the tom rolled back over and pinned Nettlepaw down.

"Scrawny apprentice! You've annoyed me long enough. I think I'll take care of you." He said with a snarl. Nettlepaw felt fear rush through him. Would the tom kill him? It was against the Code, but so was trespassing and hunting on another Clan's territory.

Suddenly the weight was taken off of Nettlepaw. He looked up to see Sedgefang, fighting with the strength of a whole Clan. "You don't touch him!" He heard her snarl as she sent a hard blow to his jaw.

Strangely, when Nettlepaw glanced around camp to check on his Clanmates, he couldn't spot Featherstar. *Weird.*

When the tom fled, she turned to face Nettlepaw. "Are you alright?" She asked, giving his ear a lick where it was bleeding. Nettlepaw nodded. "I-" he began, but was interrupted.

"Stop fighting!" Some cat called. "Stop!"

Chapter Twelve

The clearing stilled. Nettlepaw turned to face the source of the voice, heart pounding. It was Sagefeather, standing boldly in the camp entrance, back from a herb gathering mission, with Mudpaw behind her.

"This is pointless! Why are we attacking each other?" She yowled.

"You've been stealing our prey!" A cat Nettlepaw recognized as Drizzletail, AutumnClan's deputy shouted.

"But you've been doing the same!" Birchclaw hissed. "I scented it myself!"

Sagefeather shook her head. "Neither Clan has been stealing prey. This is a misunderstanding." She had both Clans' attention now. "This was a setup! A distraction! And I know who was behind it all."

"You're meowing nonsense." An AutumnClan senior warrior accused.

Sagefeather shook her head. "Follow me. If I'm right, we don't have much time."

Intrigued, Nettlepaw padded after his medicine cat a short distance out of camp. When he saw the scene before him, his blood went cold.

That's where Featherstar went, he thought sickly.

In front of him was the still body of his leader. She had a clean slice across her throat that had bled and dried up too late. And above her was her own deputy, Liontooth.

Beside Nettlepaw, Finchpaw stifled a gasp and pressed against him, but her father was looking at Sagefeather.

"How did you know?" He hissed coldly.

"Your scent had crossed the border. I knew something was up, so I came back to camp and found this."

He smiled. "Bright she-cat." Twitching his tail in annoyance, he looked around the cluster of cats. "I suppose it's no use hiding the truth any longer."

"I wanted to be leader, to lead SummerClan into greatness and power. I figured, stage a battle between two Clans. During the battle when every cat is distracted, I'd take care of this one and say she was killed in battle." Liontooth explained with a glance at Featherstar.

"I allied with a few cats from AutumnClan. They hunted on our side while I did on theirs. I figured it would cause tension." He licked a paw. "I was right."

"When I heard the plans to attack AutumnClan, I went to warn them." *So that's where he was going!* Nettlepaw thought in surprise. "I wasn't planning on launching my plan that early, but it was necessary."

Sagefeather bared her teeth in a snarl. It was the only time Nettlepaw had ever seen her truly angry. "You filthy excuse for a warrior." She spat. "I assume in your quest for power you didn't assume how many cats you would hurt?"

"Exile him!" A few cats chanted. "Exile him!"

Liontooth purred. "Very well. Would any cat like to stay loyal and come with me?"

No cat responded. The former deputy bared his teeth in disgust. "Unfaithful worms. No matter. I'll find better, more loyal followers."

"But I can always trust my kits, can't I?" He said silkily, turning toward Finchpaw and Thornpaw.

Finchpaw snarled. "I would *never* follow you! I am loyal to my Clan and you should have been as well." Her voice hardly shook as she denied her father, and Nettlepaw felt proud of his friend.

Liontooth hissed. "Thornpaw?"

The golden apprentice took longer to respond. "I trusted you." He said softly. "I looked up to you. But not any longer."

His father glared at the cats. "Fine. But I will return, and you all will be sorry you ever cast me away." Then the deputy turned tail and left without a trace.

Sagefeather snarled. "Good riddance."

Featherstar coughed suddenly, surprising all the cats there. She lay for a moment, then rose to shaky paws.

"I heard what happened," she said in a raspy voice. "Is it true?" Sagefeather nodded solemnly.

Her icy blue eyes narrowed. "I think it is time for you to leave." She said to Echostar who had been watching in horror the whole time. He met her cold gaze with one of his own but didn't argue, leaving with his Clan trailing behind.

"I have only two lives left," she said quietly.

Sagefeather nodded. "You must be careful."

Nettlepaw felt Finchpaw leaning on his shoulder when they entered camp again, but he was hardly conscious of the weight. He couldn't believe his own deputy would do such a thing, and even more shocking was his leader's confession. He couldn't imagine SummerClan without its faithful, experienced leader at its head, or without its strong and confident deputy at her side.

But when he saw the scene in camp, his heart stopped. His worries about Featherstar and Liontooth were forgotten.

On the ground, in the center of camp was the still, lifeless body of Nettlepaw's own father, who had died of his wounds before any cat could get to him.

Dustcloud!

* * *

Nettlepaw knew there was no hope of saving his father when Sagefeather exited the medicine den. "He's still alive," she said. "But unconscious. And it's unlikely he'll wake before..." she trailed off. Nettlepaw understood.

Letting out a wail, he raced into the den. Nettlepaw buried his nose into his father's thick fur, now tainted with the sharp scent of blood. He felt like kit, but didn't care. Dustcloud was dying.

Sedgefang, who had entered the den shortly after Nettlepaw, met his gaze with empty and sad eyes.

Sagefeather glanced solemnly at the two. "I'll let you say your goodbyes." She mewed.

Nettlepaw felt a surge of grief. *How can I cope without him?*

How can Sedgefang? His mother relied so heavily on Dustcloud, as he did her. They were meant to be together, and now that they were forced apart he didn't know how she would survive.

"Goodbye, my love." She whispered into his fur. "I will never forget you, and will always miss you." Her eyes glinted with grief. "I'll take care of Nettlepaw."

Nettlepaw kept his face buried in his father's side. How could he have been ashamed of having him as a father? He was a great father, always there for Nettlepaw even when he didn't want him to be.

He should have spent more time with Dustcloud. Nettlepaw let out a whimper of grief.

"Goodbye, father." Nettlepaw whispered. "I'll never forget you."

At some point Sagefeather ushered him out of the den and into a nest, but he wasn't aware. He heard voices speaking softly of how Featherstar would name a deputy the next day and Dustcloud would have a vigil, but he wasn't really listening.

He was conscious of Finchpaw padding into the den and laying next to him, pelt pressed to his. They had both lost a father that day.

Chapter Thirteen

Nettlepaw woke the next morning, realizing Sagefeather had treated his wounds while he slept. The tear in his ear would probably leave a scar, but his other wounds were healing well.

The wound in his heart after losing Dustcloud, however, was not filled and would most likely never be completely. Nettlepaw rested his head on his paws, feeling empty.

Finchpaw was already gone when he woke, but there was half of a rabbit she had left for him. He took a bite, but wasn't really hungry and ended up pushing it to the side.

A leaf-bare wind seemed to slice through Nettlepaw's fur, but he barely noticed. The pain inside him was was worse anyway.

Sedgefang padded into the den, curling around him like she had when he was a small kit. They lay there like that for a moment, simply enjoying each other's presence.

"It's going to be okay," his mother assured him. "I know it hurts now, but it won't always be like this. One day you'll look back on this and be happy you had him, even if it wasn't as long as you hoped."

At these words, Nettlepaw felt another surge of grief and rage. *How could AutumnClan just enter our camp and kill him?* He thought in anger. *Why has StarClan allowed this to happen?*

"We have to be there at his vigil," Sedgefang murmured, rising to her paws. But Nettlepaw stayed where he was.

"I don't want to. If I go..." he trailed off. *If I go, it means he is really dead. If I stay here, I can pretend when I wake up he will be there to take me hunting or climbing and tell me he is proud of me.*

"You must go," his mother said firmly. "You should honor him and

how he was brave when... when..." she trailed off, and Nettlepaw felt anger rush through him again.

"Brave?" Nettlepaw spat. "How would being brave make up for what happened? We weren't even fighting for anything! His death was *pointless*."

Sedgefang met his eyes, and he saw that hers were filled with immense sadness. "It's the least you can do. We can't go back now."

Nettlepaw caved. "Alright." *How is she being so strong?*

His mother smiled, though her eyes were still sad. "Let's go. It's starting soon."

Nettlepaw rose to heavy paws and followed her slowly out of the den. The bright sunlight made him squint. A few cats looked at him sympathetically, but he kept his head hung, not looking back at them.

Featherstar was standing on a branch of the Clantree. Dustcloud's body lay in the center of camp, with his various wounds now cleaned and laced with lavender so the scent of blood was covered and he almost looked asleep. *But it just seems... fake.*

Nettlepaw knew underneath Dustcloud was really dead. He knew he wasn't waking up that day or ever, so what was the point of trying to hide it?

"Tonight I would like to honor SummerClan's warrior who gave his life in the battle last night." Featherstar began.

"Dustcloud was a brave and noble warrior. When he joined the Clan, I must admit I had my doubts. But he has proved himself time and time again." She lowered her head, and Nettlepaw had to look away from Dustcloud's body again.

"May I speak now?" Sedgefang asked in a hoarse voice. Featherstar nodded.

"He was an amazing father and an even better mate. We relied so heavily on each other, and I don't know how I will... how I will go

on without him." She trailed off, gathering herself. "But I know that is what he would want and I will go on, if only to see him again someday."

Nettlepaw realized most cats had turned to look at him.

"Dustcloud... he was a great father," he said, voice hoarse. Clearing it, Nettlepaw continued. "Sometimes I was reluctant to spend time with him because of what other cats would say." He had to force himself to not look at Thornpaw. "And now I regret that."

"He was always there for me. He was the best father any cat could ask for, and I pushed him aside." Nettlepaw looked at his paws. "I just hope one day, I'll see him again and make up for it."

Featherstar nodded solemnly. "Would any others like to add something?" Nettlepaw didn't listen as Brightpetal told her feelings about him when he first joined, or how he was a great friend to Mistdapple and Cloverwing. Sedgefang's sisters.

I'm sorry, Father. I hope you can forgive me some day.

He couldn't believe how he could have ever been ashamed of Dustcloud's roots. *He was a warrior, through and through.*

And one day I will be too. His sadness was replaced by a surge of confidence.

But Nettlepaw only felt empty as Brightpetal and Flowerstream carried his father's body out of camp to be buried. *How can I continue to live my life without him?*

"I have another task to do today, though it is not with such a heavy heart." Featherstar mewed with a swish of her tail.

"After the shock of Liontooth's betrayal, I felt it was not the right time to name another cat to take his place," she continued. "So I will do so now, before moonhigh."

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice." Featherstar mewed. Nettlepaw was curious to hear who the deputy was, but it was

shadowed by his grief.

"The new deputy of SummerClan is Cindershade."

The dark gray warrior's eyes gleamed with surprise, but she kept her cool demeanor. "I am grateful, Featherstar," she mewed. "But am I really the right choice? There are many great senior warriors to choose from."

Featherstar purred. "You are my choice, Cindershade. You will do great things for this Clan."

Nettlepaw wasn't surprised that she was doubtful. Being a deputy was only one step away from leader, and not every cat could handle that position. But Featherstar seemed confident in her choice, and Nettlepaw agreed that Cindershade would be a good deputy.

Cats began to leave for their dens, and Nettlepaw didn't wait for any other cat to speak with him before retreating to the medicine cat den. *I don't want to be asked more questions. I don't want to be reminded of what happened.*

But Finchpaw was already waiting for him when he returned. "I brought you something," she said cheerfully, but Nettlepaw could tell she wasn't really feeling it.

Nettlepaw sniffed the squirrel she brought, but still no hunger came to him. "You can have it," he replied, laying down in his nest.

"You didn't eat the rabbit I left this morning."

Nettlepaw looked up at the apprentice. "What about it?"

She sighed and lay down in the nest next to him. "I'm sorry if I'm being too much. But I lost my father that day as well, and I only want to help. I wish you'd stop pushing me away,"

Nettlepaw felt a twinge of guilt. *I could have been a bit nicer about it, but I still want to be alone.*

Finchpaw huffed. "I wish you could go back and be the way you were." She said half to herself. Nettlepaw closed his eyes, trying to

ignore the comment.

Sorry, Finchpaw, but I don't know if I'll ever be the same again.

Chapter Fourteen

Nettlepaw ran through the shadowy forest, mud clumping between his claws and in his pelt. He felt fear run through him like a river, but wasn't sure what he was fleeing from.

"Your time has come," the strange she-cat screeched. "Your path will be determined!"

Nettlepaw felt fury flow through him, but put on a burst of speed and ran even faster.

"It has come!" She yowled. "Nettlepaw, wake up."

Nettlepaw stopped in his tracks. Her voice sounded different. "What?" He hissed as he felt himself slipping into the waking world.

"Nettlepaw, wake up." Applebreeze whispered again. Her eyes were dull and fur matted, and she looked like she hadn't been sleeping.

Nettlepaw yawned widely. "Why?" He grunted, turning around to fall back asleep, pushing back the lasting adrenaline from his dream.

Applebreeze prodded his side until he rolled back over with a huff. "Training."

At his groan of a response, his mentor continued. "I know you're probably not feeling up to it," she said gently. "But you have to continue your duties. If it's what you really want, to be a great warrior, this is how you do it."

Nettlepaw was only half-convinced. "Why should I be a great warrior? Aren't I just a *kittypet*?" He snapped.

Applebreeze bared her teeth in a hint of a snarl. "You are *not* a kittypet! I was only an apprentice when your father joined the Clan, but I knew he would be great for us! He stopped being a kittypet the day he set paw in camp and you never were one. Nettlepaw, do

you beg for food from twolegs?" She hissed.

"No." He said reluctantly, seeing her point but not wanting to admit it.

"Do you stay safe in a twoleg's den during the cold season, never hunting or feeling what it's like to be a real cat?"

"No."

"Do you lay around all day in the sun, never getting anything done?"

Nettlepaw felt his pelt grow hot. The last two days were pretty much doing that, though he had good reason to. Right?

What if Dustcloud would have wanted me to move on? What if I'm disappointing him because of that?

"I won't any longer." Nettlepaw decided, rising to his paws. "So fine. Training."

Applebreeze's eyes brightened, though they were still dull with lack of sleep. "Good. I thought we'd meet up just outside of camp in the grassland."

Nettlepaw barely held back his grin. *She knows I'm happier in the hills,* he thought. *Applebreeze is such a great mentor.*

"Are we ready to go?" Stonesong asked. Finchpaw stood beside him, and Thornpaw and Cloverwing were near. To his surprise, Owlfeather and Branchwhisker were there as well with Leopardpaw and Goldenpaw, and even Windpaw and her mentor Mapleblaze.

"This is quite the group," Applebreeze commented. Nettlepaw silently agreed, though he was more focused on Thornpaw's challenging glare. *I'm not intimidated by him!*

"Yes, we wanted all the apprentices together," Branchwhisker mewed warmly.

"Then let's go," Stonesong said gruffly. Cloverwing flicked him with

her tail. "Don't be so harsh," Nettlepaw heard her whisper.

He snorted but didn't argue as he led the impromptu patrol out of the camp for training.

Cloverwing took charge after that. "I want you all to split into teams. Leopardpaw, Finchpaw, and Nettlepaw on one team, Thornpaw, Windpaw, and Goldenpaw on the other. Understood?" The apprentices nodded.

"Pretend you're enemy Clans fighting over a border. No claws!" Cloverwing added, with a teasing glance at Thornpaw and Nettlepaw that still made his pelt prickle. "Begin!"

Nettlepaw turned toward his denmates. "We can beat them easily," he said. "Leopardpaw, take your sister. I'm sure you know most of her fighting techniques by now." The golden apprentice nodded, purring in amusement. "I should've known you were going to take charge."

While Nettlepaw briefly ducked his head in embarrassment, Finchpaw spoke up. "Then should I take Thornpaw?"

Nettlepaw shook his head. "You'd match better with Windpaw. I don't have as much training as you, and she's an older apprentice." Finchpaw nodded, eyes gleaming, while Nettlepaw added silently *and I want to take Thornpaw myself.*

The other three apprentices lined up. Thornpaw traced a line in the dirt with one sharp claw, eyes glinting. "I am Thornstar of ThornClan," he said gallantly. "And you are trespassing on my territory!" Nettlepaw heard chuckling coming from the mentors.

He took his chance. "Well *I* am Nettlestar of NettleClan!" He hissed. "I say it's our territory!" The name sounded right on his tongue. *Maybe one day I really will be Nettlestar.* He shook off the thought. It was just a kit's dream, surely every cat wanted to be leader but few actually became one.

Finchpaw and Leopardpaw yowled challengingly behind him, and Thornpaw lunged at Nettlepaw. Nettlepaw threw off the golden

apprentice before he could drive him to the ground, and faced him with his teeth bared. He heard sounds of fighting, and assumed Leopardpaw and Finchpaw had joined the tussle.

"NettleClan will rule the forest!" He cried, leaping towards Thornpaw. His denmate snarled and they locked in battle, rolling across the ground.

"ThornClan is stronger!" Thornpaw retorted. "*ThornClan* didn't let their warriors die!"

Nettlepaw had a feeling they weren't speaking of their made-up Clans any longer. "NettleClan's warriors are loyal! They don't *betray* their leaders!" He spat, shoving Thornpaw off once more.

"NettleClan is weak! NettleClan takes in strays as warriors!" Thornpaw yowled. "ThornClan is pure, and that is what makes us stronger!"

Nettlepaw raked his claws across Thornpaw's face. "Do *not* speak of the Clan that way!" He growled. Thornpaw looked up at him defiantly, claws extending as battle-hungry as always.

"That is quite enough," Stonesong growled. "I think we are done here." Nettlepaw realized the fighting had stopped among his denmates, and most were watching the gray warrior.

"Sorry," Nettlepaw mumbled, while Thornpaw muttered something that might have been an apology.

Stonesong gave them another harsh glare before turning around again. Nettlepaw was numbly aware of Applebreeze walking next to him, and the whole patrol making their way back to camp.

"I thought I taught you better than this," Applebreeze mewed at last. "You're letting your claws think for you, Nettlepaw. You should follow your heart."

Follow your heart. It sounded like something a mother would tell her kit, he thought bitterly.

"I've said this before and I still mean it," Applebreeze said sternly.

"You need to learn to be a Clanmate to Thornpaw."

Nettlepaw nodded half-heartedly, seeming to satisfy his mentor. "I'll speak with you about this again soon." She promised.

Thornpaw will never insult my father again and get away with it, Nettlepaw thought resentfully.

He should watch where he steps.

Was that laughter, coming from the shadowy she-cat who haunted his dreams?